

Light on Dark Clouds: Grumbling

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Preacher: Taylor Hollingsworth

[0 : 00] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! We're going to do expository sermons and stay in one text and draw out the meaning of what God's revealed in that text.

But this morning, we're going to primarily be in Numbers, but then we'll explore a little more broadly on the topic of grumbling. So let's read God's Word.

Numbers chapter 11, starting in verse 1, it says this. And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes.

And when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down.

[1 : 23] So the name of that place was called Taborah, because the fire of the Lord burned among them. Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving.

And the people of Israel also wept again and said, oh, that we had meat to eat. We remember the fish we ate in Egypt and cost nothing.

The cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there's nothing at all but this manna to look at.

Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it and ground it in hand mills or beat it in mortars and boiled it in pots and made cakes of it.

And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it. Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent.

[2 : 32] And the anger of the Lord blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. Moses said to the Lord, why have you dealt ill with your servant?

And why have I not found favor in your sight that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth that you should say to me, carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing child to the land that you swore to give their fathers?

Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, give us meat that we may eat. I'm not able to carry all this people alone.

The burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, kill me at once. If I find favor in your sight that I may not see my wretchedness. Then the Lord said to Moses, gather for me 70 men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting and let them take their stand there with you.

And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them. And they shall bear the burden of the people with you so that you may not bear it yourself alone.

[3 : 54] And say to the people, consecrate yourselves for tomorrow. And you shall eat meat. For you have wept in the hearing of the Lord, saying, who will give us meat to eat?

For it was better for us in Egypt. Therefore, the Lord will give you meat. And you shall eat. You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying, why did we come out of Egypt?

Look down at verse 31. Then a wind from the Lord sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea, and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side, and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground.

And the people rose all that day, and all that night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers, and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.

[5 : 17] While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck down the people with a very great plague.

Therefore, the name of that place was called Kibreth Hathava, because there they buried the people who had the craving.

From Kibreth Hathava, the people journeyed to Hazoroth, and they remained at Hazoroth. May the Lord bless the preaching and the hearing of his word.

In 1972, an award-winning theological treatise was published on the topic of suffering.

It captured the relatable response of the human heart to the shock of unmet expectations. Millions of people have read this treatise.

[6 : 27] Many in this very room have read this treatise multiple times, believe it or not. This survey of suffering goes by the title of Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.

You know this book. Alexander could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. He went to sleep with gum in his mouth and woke up with gum in his hair.

When he got out of bed, he tripped over his skateboard and by mistake dropped his sweater in the sink while the water was still running. At one point in the book, Alexander says, My bath was too hot, I got soap in my eyes, my marble went down the drain, and I had to wear my railroad train pajamas.

I hate my railroad train pajamas. It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day for Alexander. Nothing at all was right. Everything went wrong. Right down to Lima beans at supper and kissing on TV. What do you do on a day like that?

[7 : 43] This book is famous because it's so incredibly relatable, isn't it? Not just in childhood, but during every season of life. We are confronted with curveballs.

Hopes are left unmet. Dreams unfulfilled. Expectations halted. Plans disrupted. Life rerouted. Alexander showcases what our natural tendency is too.

It is the default of the human heart in these circumstances to grumble. We see it described in different ways even here in our text, Numbers 11.

They complain. They weep. They gripe. Why? Because things have not gone according to plan.

Or to say it more accurately, things have not gone according to their plan. Even though Alexander's story captures grumbling in kind of a funny way, Numbers 11 presents us with a sobering reality.

[8 : 56] Grumbling is no laughing matter. It is deadly. Deadly. Grumbling is a symptom that can be traced to a sin-sick heart.

And even though grumbling might feel like the just and right response to derail plans, it actually reveals something deeper about how we understand ourselves in relation to God and the world around us.

Who's in charge here? Who should be in charge? Whose expectations should be met? Can it actually be a good thing when our plans are challenged and changed?

What's happening when life seems to go sideways and we don't get our way? You see, Scripture actually presents every circumstance in our lives as an opportunity for one of two responses.

Every moment, every event in our lives is a watershed that will flow in one direction or another.

We're most familiar with that slope that goes towards grumbling.

[10 : 14] But how is it that Paul can say that he knows how to be content in every situation, including his need?

Contentment is not grumbling. How can he rejoice while he's in prison and write letters of encouragement and sing behind bars? Rejoicing and singing aren't grumbling.

How can James tell the church to count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds? Joy in a trial is not grumbling.

Every circumstance presents us with these two options to respond. Every one. The alternative to grumbling that God calls us to is gratitude.

Gratitude. I believe that the main point for us this morning is to replace deadly grumbling with life-giving gratitude by remembering God is powerful, good, and trustworthy in all circumstances.

[11 : 26] We're going to take a look at these two responses to our circumstances and the implications for our lives in two very broad points. The first is grumbling.

Grumbling, and I've subtitled this the consuming cancer of the soul. First, we're going to look at the episode of Numbers 11. Then, we're going to kind of pull back more broadly and briefly to see what God has to say about gratitude.

So, look at verse 1 with me. And it says, and the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes.

The first thing that we have to say is that there are different kinds of complaint in Scripture. There's two types of complaint that we see throughout Scripture.

Now, I want to show you a distinction between these two types of complaint. One is not sinful and the other one is sinful. We see the psalmist say, for example, in Psalm 142, with my voice, I cry out to the Lord.

[12 : 39] With my voice, I plead for mercy to the Lord. I pour out my what? Complaint before Him. I tell my trouble before Him.

So what's the difference here? Well, there seems to be two major differences at work. What they're complaining about and who they're complaining to.

The psalmist does not attach, notice, any wrong to God. There is no accusation lodged against God. He is earnestly trying to make sense of a broken world around Him.

This is not a criticism. This is a petition. Also, notice who the psalmist is complaining to. The psalmist cries out to the Lord.

He begs the Lord for mercy. He pours out his complaint and his trouble before the Lord. The psalmist is in communication with and submission to the Lord.

[13 : 49] He's going to the only one who can do something about his situation. You see? You contrast that with what we see in Numbers 11.

In verse 1, what are they complaining about? They're complaining about their, quote, misfortunes. Right? There are fortunes for some lucky people that they get and then there are the misfortunes that we have received.

They've already concluded what it is that they should and should not get. Do you see what I'm saying? And they are lamenting that they are numbered among the not-gots.

They have assessed and determined this ain't right, God. That's what's happened here. So they are making their misfortunes known. And who is it that they are complaining to?

Take note. It says they're complaining in the hearing of the Lord. He's within earshot, but they're not complaining to the Lord.

[14 : 58] They're complaining about the Lord to one another. You see? So the difference in these complaints will be similar to how your child approaches a complaint.

Just think about this scenario. If your child comes up to you respectfully, knowing that you love them, and they express how you've done something, and their understanding that hurt them, or you've done something that they don't understand, you can work through that issue with that child. As painful as that interchange can be, there's an opportunity to work through that personally. Now imagine another scenario with your kids.

Maybe you just got everybody some Dairy Barn ice creams to eat while you drive in your van.

Okay? And as you're pulling out, you hear your kids saying, ugh, why do we always get Dairy Barn? I like Dairy Queen better. and this chocolate is so gross. It gets sticky. It's melting too fast. I can't believe that mom would make us go here.

[16 : 13] Why not save a few dollars and just push our faces into a frozen cow patty? What would your response be? So when we talk about grumbling being the consuming cancer of the soul, we are talking about this second type of complaint.

The Bible often refers to faithless complaining as grumbling. Grumbling declares explicitly or implicitly that God is not sufficiently good, powerful, or trustworthy.

Otherwise, he would do things in a different way. More specifically, he would do things my way. It's important to make these distinctions about complaint because we don't want to deny that life is broken.

There are devastating results from sin. Absolutely. There are appropriate models of grief and lament and expressing confusion and pain to the Lord.

The wonderful news is that the Lord cares for his people and he invites us with all of our earnest struggles and our wobbling faith to come to him.

[17 : 32] It's an invitation. It's not wrong to cry out to the Lord for deliverance from suffering. But there's a right way for us to approach the Lord in trust and dependence even in the midst of suffering and uncertainty.

However, the grumbling complaint is very different. It relentlessly demands its own way. It is self-focused.

Our grumbling declares to God, what you've done isn't right and what you've given is not enough. So where does it come from?

I've been learning a lot about plumbing the last few weeks. One of the things I've learned is that there are a number of ways you can end up with a mess in your crawl space.

At one point we were having issues because of a warped seal. It wasn't handling the water because it wasn't airtight. It was leaking because it was warped.

[18 : 46] Another issue was that one of our old galvanized pipes just didn't have a cap on it at all. It was just wide open. So when water pressure built up there was nothing to stop it and it just flowed freely.

Well in a similar way there are essentially two reasons for grumbling and both have to do with our relationship to God. One is that we have a warped view of God and his works.

Like a warped seal we don't make a proper connection. we think of him wrongly and we remember his works wrongly and when the pressures of circumstances rise it reveals our warped view of who he is and grumbling leaks out.

The other reason for grumbling is that there is no relationship to God. There is no cap. The pressure of life circumstances run out freely in the form of grumbling because God does not even factor in.

And we can see evidence of both the warped view and the non-existent view of God in this passage. Look back at Numbers 11 verse 4. It says, Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving and the people of Israel also wept again and said, Oh that we had meat to eat.

[20 : 10] We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing. verse 6. But now our strength is dried up and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.

So what was their misfortune? Do you see it? They had a craving, a desire that had been left unmet.

Where's the meat Lord? And we see grumbling leaking out. So where is it coming from? Remember that these are the people that God had just released from 400 years in slavery.

These are the people who have seen unparalleled miracles of the one true God displaying his authority over the most powerful nation in the known world.

He parted the Red Sea and allowed these people to cross over on dry ground with their pockets full of Egyptian jewelry while their enemies were swallowed up. Not only did God miraculously save them from slavery in Egypt, he had just given them the law and promised to be with them and guide them.

[21 : 28] Three days into receiving that law. We're three days from Mount Sinai right here in this text. It's not as if they were out in the wilderness starving. God had not forsaken them.

In fact, they were experiencing daily miraculous provision from God himself. He gave them exactly what they needed just in time without any of their help.

And what did the people do? They grumble. There's nothing at all but this manna to look at.

Do you see the insanity of this complaint? God is faithfully and miraculously providing for them but they have a craving for something different.

Their grumbling is a declaration to God what you've done isn't right and what you've given is not enough. They are not remembering who they are in relation to God rightly.

[22 : 36] Their memory of who God was and what he has done is warped. Not only that, verse 5 reveals that they had a warped memory of Egypt too.

They say, verse 5, we remember, remember, the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing. Oh, those were the days.

isn't that warped? They are looking back at the place of their oppression and slavery. The place where their children were murdered and they broke their backs under the heavy hand of their tyrannical master.

That's what they're looking back at. They remember the fish but that fish was not free. It cost them everything. But here they are now, begrudging the gracious provision of God and longing for the benefits of slavery.

Their memory of God and his works were warped. They no longer remember the goodness of God's gracious and miraculous provision. Instead, they grumble against him.

[23 : 49] This is an unfamiliar pattern. If you remember, this has been happening since the beginning. God saw that it was not good for man to be alone.

So he graciously provided Eve to compliment Adam. Do you remember what Adam did? First thing, he broke out into poetry. Delighting in the gift of this woman.

That's Genesis 2. Do you remember what happens in Genesis 3? Next chapter, Adam points his finger at God and says, the woman you gave me, she gave me the fruit and I, you gave her to me. What you've done isn't right. What you've given is not enough. Do we remember God rightly? God graciously provides us with a house, but now our days are filled with grumbling about the upkeep.

[25 : 05] God graciously answers our prayers to have a child, but now our minds are fixated on the frustrating arguments and the attitudes. God gives us a job to provide for our needs, but now we're disgruntled about the hours or the drive or the coworkers, so on and so on.

God graciously gives us a spouse, but now the days are spent thinking only about their shortcomings.

things. How is your memory regarding God and what you want celebrated as good gifts from him? Our grumbling may reveal a warped view of God's provision.

This is one way that grumbling can leak into our lives. The other reason grumbling may be in someone's life is because God does not even factor in.

If you look back at Numbers 11 verse 5, there are different groups of people mentioned here. Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving and the people of Israel also wept again.

[26 : 25] So there's this group called the rabble that was among a larger group. The word rabble refers to some non-Israelites who came out with them during the exodus.

You can see this in exodus 12. This was likely a group of other slave people that were also in bondage in Egypt. And if you notice in our passage, they are the group that had the strong craving. Then the people of Israel, more broadly, it says, also wept, indicating that this rabble instigated the grumbling and then others of the larger group joined in with them.

You see? Now if you look down at verse 33, we see the anger of the Lord kindled and the Lord strikes down the people while the meat was yet between their teeth.

Who was it that was struck down? Well, we know that not everyone was killed during this episode because they continued on. So who is it that died?

[27 : 35] Verse 34 says they buried the people who had the craving. So this was likely a group who really had no allegiance to God to begin with.

In other words, this may have been a group of unbelievers within Egypt who saw an opportunity to get out of slavery but really had no enduring trust in the God of Israel.

Israel. If this is the case, then it would make sense that their grumbling would flow freely. Even though they were physically free from slavery, they were not spiritually free from slavery to sin. God's rule over their lives was not even in the equation. Being free from Egypt was not, being free from Egypt was only a way to rule over their own lives.

Does that make sense? So they did not desire to submit to and follow God. They desired meat. Their God was their own desire.

[28 : 38] And they were angry and grumbling when their satisfaction was found lacking. Paul Tripp in his book Awe said it this way.

Most people who are angry with God are angry with him for being God. They're not angry because he has failed to deliver what he promised.

They're angry because he has failed to deliver what they craved, expected, or demanded. When all of self replaces all of God, God ceases to be your Lord and is reduced to being your indentured servant.

both kinds of people are found in this group. Those who had a warped view of God and those who thought they were God.

Both had a wrong relationship to God as revealed in their sinful grumbling. What warning signs then can we see in this text about grumbling?

[29 : 52] Well, I intentionally used the language of cancer for a few reasons. For one, grumbling does not only affect the individual. Like the multiplication of cancerous cells throughout the body, grumbling spreads to others.

In numbers, it begins with the rabble, and it spreads to the rest of the congregation. Sinful grumbling spreads like a contagion.

The church is often referred to as the body. So the health of each individual member has an impact on the whole body.

Pastor Ligon Duncan once helpfully said it this way, every battle you fight trust, every temptation you fend off, every trust you render to the Lord in the midst of your own personal circumstances has a dividend one way or another for this whole congregation.

We live for one another as we live for God. We need one another, and therefore, when we give way to a spirit of complaint rather than to live out a spirit of trust, there are consequences for the whole congregation.

[31 : 21] So when you beg the Lord for victory over the temptation to grumble, you are fighting in a way that serves all of us. When grumbling prevails, suspicion towards God and His goodness spreads.

grumbling when you fight for faith, especially in the midst of adversity and suffering, it builds all of us up.

So we have to be aware of these corporate aspects when it comes to grumbling. The second effect of grumbling that we must grapple with from this passage is the fact that it leads to death.

Like cancer, grumbling not only spreads, but it leads to death. Why are those with the craving executed by the Lord? If grumbling is a symptom of a sin-sick heart, those who live in faithlessness and rebellion against God will perish.

So when we live independently of the God who made us and we try to live as if we are God, life just unravels.

[32 : 37] To rebel against God is at the heart of sin and scripture teaches us that the wages of sin is what? It's death. You may be surprised to hear that grumbling is so closely linked to death, but look at Romans 1 verses 18 and 21.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

There's wrath coming. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or what? Give thanks to him.

And because of that, they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Do you see it? Giving thanks or gratitude as we're going to refer to it.

Gratitude is the polar opposite of the watershed of grumbling. Grumbling turns inward while gratitude turns outward. To have gratitude for something demands that we recognize we have received it from outside of ourselves.

[33 : 57] Grumbling and gratitude cannot coexist. They can't. Grumbling demands its own way while gratitude admits that a way was made for us. Gratitude is the antidote to grumbling because it rightly orients us to God as grateful recipients.

So let us turn our attention for just a few moments to gratitude. The remedy of right remembering. The reason I'm saying that gratitude is the remedy of right remembering is because it is the opposite of grumbling.

Grumbling is wrong remembering. It warps God or leaves God out. But gratitude flows out of the right remembering of who God is and who we are in relation to Him.

And this is not only when circumstances are going according to our plan. The Christian life is characterized by the steadfast hope that God is sovereign and all things are going according to His plan.

All things. So we take heart from Romans 8.28 and we know for those who love God all things work together for good.

[35 : 30] For those who are called according to His purpose which things are working together for good. This says all things. All.

Even our derailed plans, Lord. Even our unmet desires. Even our suffering. The great temptation for us is to doubt that any of these things could possibly lead to good.

Is it not? But we must understand the good that God is working all things toward. We often misinterpret the good here, myself included, as immediate personal comfort and ease.

Right? Immediate personal comfort and ease. If that's what we think, then this promise is not going to make sense.

in fact, the Christian life will not make sense at all. Instead, the good we are being promised is our conformity to the image of Jesus Christ.

[36 : 49] The promise is that he's refining our hopes, our desires, our loves to reflect our Savior. The promise that we will be united with him no matter what happens in this life.

Even our greatest pains, heartaches, and suffering. John Piper helpfully said, the confidence that a sovereign God governs for your good all the pain and all the pleasure that you will ever experience is an absolutely incomparable refuge and security and hope and power in your life.

This is the Christian hope. if we know that God is working all things together for our greatest good, then we can trust that every circumstance, even the unexpected, even the painful, even the difficult, can be received with gratitude.

It's on this basis of this unshakable hope, 1 Thessalonians can call us to this. Rejoice always!

Pray without season, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God and Christ Jesus for you.

[38 : 18] Practicing gratitude is the antidote to the cancer of grumbling. Expressing thankfulness to God has absolutely nothing to do with personality types.

We're not talking about some people who are glass-half-full kind of optimists. If you are given to pessimism or cynicism, you will not find any validation from the Bible to settle into that as a proper expression of the Christian life.

I'm talking about cultivating a disposition of gratitude toward what God has done for sinners. It's outside of personality.

It's outside of you. The power, the goodness, and trustworthiness of God is anchored in His work on behalf of sinners. You see, all of us, everyone in here, has been a grumbler historically.

And our grumbling was an indictment against God. We've said in our hearts to God, you said you were good, but look at what you've given me.

[39 : 32] It's as if we put Him on the stand to be judged. But the reality is that we are not the judge. God is the judge.

But the good news for grumblers is this. God had mercy on us. We did put God on the stand, but not in the way that we thought.

Instead of striking us down in our rebellion, God willingly went on the stand to take on all the just wrath that our sin deserved.

He went willingly for the sake of grumblers in order to transform us into a people overflowing with gratitude. And if you're not yet a Christian, I want to invite you to turn from grumbling and trust in Jesus Christ.

He will fill your heart with enduring gratitude. He's working all things together for our good. We have to go to battle against grumbling. We have to. For the sake of our own souls and for the sake of one another, we must cultivate gratitude by right remembering.

[40 : 45] I'd like to offer one practical way to do this as we close. The Christian counselor David Pallison would occasionally write what he called anti- Psalms.

It was an exercise that challenged him to write the polar opposite of the promise in scripture so that he could contrast these and then cling to the right one. So over the last few days I tried this out on a few scriptures that talk about how we should think about suffering as Christians.

And these moments are the most tempting for us as we wrestle with whether or not God is powerful, good, and trustworthy. So the following are a few anti-promises followed by the actual promises.

one characterized by grumbling, another one characterized by gratitude. I'll read them both, but we'll need to pick the true one to believe and to live by.

Romans 5, the grumbling edition first. Not only that, but we grumble in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces fickleness, and fickleness produces disgrace, and disgrace produces hopelessness.

[42 : 10] hopelessness. And hopelessness puts us to shame because God has forgotten us and has not acted for our good. Let's see the truth.

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, hope, does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

That's better. Amen. 2 Corinthians 4, one more, so we lose heart.

Our outer self is wasting away, and our inner self is decaying day by day, for this heavy, long-lasting affliction is preparing for us nothing greater lasting.

As we look to the things that are seen, and not to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are permanent and of the highest importance, but the things that are unseen are transient and of no importance.

[43 : 21] Let's see the truth. So we do not lose heart! Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day, for this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Hallelujah! That should stir gratitude in our hearts, so even on those seemingly terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days, we believe that God is working all things together for good.

So let's be a church that replaces deadly grumbling with life, giving gratitude by remembering God is powerful, good, and trustworthy in all circumstances.

May God help us. Father, we humble ourselves and we say, thank you, Lord. Thank you that you don't waste anything. Thank you that all pleasure and pain is bringing you glory.

We are not our own. We've been bought with a price. We've been brought out of slavery by your mighty hand. We are your servants. You are our God.

[44 : 46] You are our Lord. You are our King. You are our Father. We can't see, but you can see all things. We don't understand. You understand all things.

We don't know. You know all things. So we cast ourselves on you. We lean on you. We hold fast to you. In the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. You've been listening to a message at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens.

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