

28 Grumbling and Complaining – When God Doesn't Provide the Way We Want

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I owe this article an honest confession before we begin.

Last week I let the frustrations of my job get the best of me.

It festered most of the week.

Small things, building on small things, until it got the best of me, and I let a situation pull frustration and anger right out of me.

My wife runs an art studio for kids.

This summer has been hard on her business – families traveling or getting things done at home instead of wanting art classes, and she's been working tirelessly to figure out how to reach her demographic as well as tourists.

She has done an amazing job. I am genuinely impressed by the effort she has poured into it.

But it has not brought the turnout we hoped for.

So what did we do with that disappointment?

I would like to tell you we didn't lean on our own understanding. That we trusted the Lord with all our hearts.

I said I would like to tell you that. Because that is not how we handled it.

We grumbled.

We complained.

Because that is what we tend to do.

We get frustrated when God doesn't provide the way we think He ought to.

We Are Not Alone

If it helps at all, we are in good company.

Read through Scripture and you'll find this pattern again and again among the faithful.

None more than the Israelites, so soon after their miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

Paul lays it out plainly:

“Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved... Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.” (1 Corinthians 10:6, 10, LSB)

Paul is telling us directly – what happened to the Israelites is not just ancient history.

It is for our application, today.

So let’s take a deeper look at how the Israelites responded to Moses, and to God, in the days and years right after they watched Him part a sea.

Episode One – Bitter Water

Three days into the wilderness, they found water.

Bitter water. Undrinkable.

And they grumbled.

Three days.

Read that again.

Three days after walking through the Red Sea on dry ground, after watching Pharaoh’s army swallowed behind them, and already they were complaining.

God showed Moses a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. (Exodus 15:22-25)

No punishment.

Just provision.

I find it easy to judge the Israelites for how quickly they turned to complaint.

Until I recognize the same pattern in my own life.

Three days is not very long at all — and yet I’ve grumbled over less at times.

Episode Two – Manna, Quail, and the Fish

Soon after, they ran out of food entirely.

God provided manna – bread from heaven, appearing fresh every single morning. The instruction was simple: gather only what you need for the day. Those who hoarded more found it bred worms and rotted overnight. (Exodus 16)

Daily bread. Daily trust.

But later, in Numbers 11, despite this ongoing miracle, the people wept for what they used to have.

“We remember the fish we ate without cost.”

Without cost. Huh... really?

They were remembering slavery – actual bondage – and somehow romanticizing the fact that they were given food.

God sent quail.

And while the meat was still in their teeth, a plague struck those who had craved it.

Even in the middle of God’s miraculous provision, they found a way to show their disrespect.

Was it not enough that God was meeting every need?

I find it interesting that God was always providing exactly enough. Not more.

And we are rarely satisfied with exactly enough, are we.

Maybe that is simply human nature – to crave more than what we have, and then to make it worse by comparing our “enough” to someone else’s “more than enough.”

Makes you wonder why God included “you shall not covet” in the Ten Commandments.

He knew exactly what He was dealing with.

I will confess something else here.

This past week, in the middle of my own frustration, I actually found myself wishing I had never left my previous job.

Do you know why I left that job?

Because I was frustrated there too. See a pattern?

Episode Three – Water from the Rock

This next one is harder, because it strikes closer to the core of things.

At Massah and Meribah, the people quarreled with Moses and tested God, asking:

“Is Yahweh among us or not?” (Exodus 17:7)

God had Moses strike the rock. Water flowed.

But look at the name the place was given.

Testing. Quarreling.

Permanently marked, right there on the map of Israel’s journey.

I think this is one of the most honest moments in the entire wilderness account, because it names what our grumbling is usually actually about.

It is rarely just about the water, or the food, or the frustration of the moment.

It is about whether God is really here.

Whether He sees us.

Whether He cares.

Episode Four – The Twelve Spies at Kadesh Barnea

This is the one with the most severe consequence of them all.

Twelve spies were sent into Canaan. Ten came back with a fearful report.

There are giants in the land.

The people grumbled against Moses and Aaron. They said it would have been better to die in Egypt. They even discussed appointing a new leader to take them back. (Numbers 13-14)

Think about where they were standing.

They had endured the entire journey.

And now, on the edge of the very thing they had been promised, they faced a new threat – a land already inhabited, and by giants no less.

Are there giants in your life?

Have you finally arrived somewhere you believed God was leading you – expecting peace, security, rest – only to find it inhabited by something that feels insurmountable?

Over time, their constant grumbling, their constant complaint, their refusal to believe, led to severe consequences.

That entire generation would not enter the promised land.

They would wander the wilderness for forty years, until they had all died, except for Caleb and Joshua – the two who trusted.

I have wondered about this many times.

What if the people had responded like Joshua and Caleb instead?

What if the majority had trusted that the God who parted a sea and rained bread from heaven could also handle giants?

They might have entered the land within days.

Instead, their attitude and their lack of faith cost them forty years.

Our grumbling can cost us more than a bad mood or an uncomfortable evening.

It can cost us a significant piece of our future.

That is a real and sobering consequence.

The Maintenance Halls

In my book I write about the parts of the castle that require constant, unglamorous upkeep.

Not the walls under siege.

The quiet halls that simply need tending.

We rarely grumble when the castle faces an obvious attack. We rise to that.

But the routine repairs – the parts of life that never stop needing attention – those are where the grumbling creeps in.

Marah wasn't a siege. It was three days without water.

The manna wasn't an attack. It was daily bread that required daily trust, day after day after day, with no dramatic ending in sight.

That is where I live most weeks.

Not in crisis.

In maintenance.

And maintenance, it turns out, is exactly where my complaining tends to live too.

What I Am Learning – Again

Trust me when I say this is not easy.

I know the pattern.

I know how quickly I fall back into old ways the moment difficulty arrives – I proved that again just this week.

But I want to encourage you, and myself, to rise above it.

God may have you in a difficult, frustrating place right now.

That does not mean it will last forever.

Whatever it is – your marriage, your children, your health, a job or business that isn't yielding what you hoped it would – lay it at the foot of the cross.

Jesus said:

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30, LSB)

His burden is light. His yoke is easy. In Him we can find rest.

But here is what I have noticed about myself – more often than not, I walk right alongside Jesus while carrying a weight that was never meant to be mine alone.

He is right there.

Ready.

Willing.

Able.

But He will not force the burden from your hands.

We have to offer it freely.

We have to actually invite Him into it.

Maybe today is the day you stop trying to carry this alone.

Maybe today is the day you finally believe that He is able to carry it, and to sustain you, if you will simply let Him.

Every day we choose not to, is another day that opens the door to grumbling and complaining.

It wears away at our soul.

It's time to stop allowing that to happen and start allowing Jesus to help carry the load.

If you're struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. Whatever giant is standing in front of you right now – you do not have to face it alone, and you do not have to wander for it. Please stay.

William James Meyer is the author of “Do You Live in a Castle? Breaking Free from the Walls That Hold You Hostage.” He writes from a Christian perspective as a fellow traveler – someone who grumbled last week, and is still learning to lay it down instead of carry it.

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