

Grumbler...!

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

A while back, I came across a great quote. It speaks to the almost constant bickering between political parties as it relates to programs and budgets:

"Witnessing the Republicans and the Democrats bicker over the U.S. debt is similar to having watched two drunks argue over a bar bill on the Titanic."

- From an Idaho newspaper editorial

We often spend more of our time grumbling, complaining, and pointing fingers of blame at each other than we do finding helpful solutions to the problems we face. It just seems easier to point at one another than to do the hard and sacrificial work of righting the wrongs around us; and it usually costs us something in the process.

You can turn on just about any news station today and get your fill of pain and problems. Economic, moral, relational, social, and spiritual concerns surround us at every turn. And the number of pundits pointing fingers are about equal to the total U.S. population. Government, industry, banking, personal debt, and even global warming all get a share of the blame. Even God is to blame according to a growing percentage of the populace. But this is really nothing new.

Thousands of years ago, the Israelites were in horrible bondage in Egypt. They had suffered at the hands of their task-masters for centuries, over four hundred years to be exact. They groaned and cried, prayed and wept to God for deliverance. When seemingly out of the blue, at least to them, God decided the time was right for a miracle.

Moses was called and commissioned for the task. Aaron, his brother, was drafted as a liaison or mouthpiece. Instructions were given and carried out. And a marvelous manifestation of God's power and righteousness was worked on behalf of God's people (*the 10 plagues*), to the utter humiliation of all Egypt.

You would think that a spectacle like this would result in overwhelming gratitude and humble obedience on the part of the Jews. But you'd be wrong! Just three days after the crossing of the Red Sea, we see our first glimpse of what would become, a life-long pattern.

Ex 15:22 Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. ... **24** So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"

You know, it's an interesting principle that what a person practices in tough times, tends to be their practice in the good. In other words, the attitudes we apply when we suffer lack or hardship are often the same attitudes we express when things improve. It's the old, glass half-empty or half-full syndrome.

The Israelites wept and complained because of their suffering in Egypt, and no one blamed them for doing so because of the horrible conditions. But interestingly

enough, when they were led into freedom, and the difficulty that sometimes comes with independence, they longed for the "blessings" of Egypt.

Ex 16:3 The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the LORD'S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

You see, they had gotten used to complaining. And even though the work was hard and they lived in bondage, there were elements of their lives that could affect gratitude; they had food to eat and water to drink. There were benefits to their lives in Egypt. But none-the-less, their focus was on their lack, and it created a pattern.

Three times, in as many chapters, we see the Israelites grumbling about the conditions of their liberty. It began just three days after God's miraculous deliverance across the Red Sea, and then happened again two different times soon thereafter.

Ex 15:24 So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"

Ex 16:2 The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

Ex 17:3 But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

Each time difficulty arose, they grumbled and accused Moses (*but actually they were accusing God; Ex. 16:6-7, 17:2*). Their loving heavenly Father had just plucked them from a life of pain, drudgery, and harsh labor; and yet, since life wasn't "easy," they fell back into discontent.

Grumbling builds on a foundation of misaligned expectations. This discontent grows as we compare our present circumstances to what we think we *deserve*. The Jews thought freedom from bondage also meant full bellies, lives of leisure, and a lack of conflict. They had forgotten their Biblical history; even Adam and Eve had work to do as caretakers of the garden. The Israelites hadn't considered that following God might involve enduring hardship as they trusted in God's provision.

As I said, grumbling and discontent is a lifestyle that paints all of our perspectives. A lifestyle of critical thinking can find a flaw in the greatest of experiences. It can even rob the sweetness from freedom. None-the-less, grumbling was a pattern that haunted much of the Israelite's future; even to the days of Jesus and beyond.

Num 14:2 All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!"

Num 16:41 But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD'S people."

Luke 15:2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes {began} to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Luke 19:7 When they saw it, they all {began} to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

John 6:61 But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, "Does this cause you to stumble?"

Jude 1:16 These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their {own} lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of {gaining an} advantage.

Benjamin Franklin once said, "*The sentence which has most influenced my life is, 'Some persons grumble because God placed thorns among roses. Why not thank God because He placed roses among thorns?'*"

Grumbling neutralizes faith. It prevents the trials of life from bringing any possible benefit to our characters (*Rom. 5:3-5, James 1:2-4*). Discontent assumes God's impotence to move in a situation. And whether we mean to or not, grumbling opens the door to further doubt in God's love and commitment. You can't state your love and devotion to God in one breath and then turn around and grumble and complain in the next.

A large family sat around the table for breakfast one morning. As usual, the father prayed, giving thanks to God for the food. Immediately afterward, however, as was his bad habit, he began to grumble about hard times, the poor quality of the food he was forced to eat, the way it was cooked, and much more. His little daughter interrupted him saying, "Father, do you suppose God heard what you prayed a little while ago?" "Certainly," replied the father confidently. "And did He hear what you said about the food and the cooking?" "Of course," the father replied, but not as confidently as before. His daughter continued, "Then, Father, which did God believe?"

The Jews claimed to be "*the people of God.*" They boasted in the power of Yahweh. But in the next moment, they grumbled because "life" (*meaning God*) had not been kind to them (*meaning they still had trials*). Their expectations were off-base and selfishly motivated.

God never promised a life of ease; but He did promise His grace and provision. God didn't promise a life without trial; but He did promise His unswerving compassion and peace. God didn't promise a life without enemies; but He did promise His protection and deliverance. God didn't promise a life without pain; but He did promise His comfort and hope. God didn't promise a life without death or loss; but He did promise His joy and new life.

Just a footnote as we close; it is amazing to me that for all the times the Israelites grumbled, there are just as many times where we see God's patient grace. Exodus 15 shows the people grumble for water; God provides sweet waters of refreshing. Exodus 16 reveals them complaining about hunger; God supplies manna and quail. Exodus 17 returns to the complaint of thirst; God makes water gush forth from a rock.

Oh, there are times when we see God's patience run out with His ungrateful and grumbling people. But it is only when He has been pushed so far that to not act would be a compromise of His justice. How fortunate we are that God's default response is grace rather than justice. But

may we never take His grace for granted, and allow our selfish expectations to drive us to grumble, when we have so much for which to be grateful.