

Grate{full} – How the Gospel Makes Us Thankful

Grumbling

Exodus 16:1-12

Mark Vroegop

¹They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ³ and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” ⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “At evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?” ⁸ And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD.” ⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, ‘Come near before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.’” ¹⁰ And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ And the LORD said to Moses, ¹² “I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God’” (Ex. 16:1-2 ESV).

The theme for this series has been: “When you see grace, say thanks—always.”

Over the last three weeks, we’ve looked at the subject of gratefulness from a number of angles. In week one, we looked at the goal of gratitude—learning the importance of affirming the goodness of God’s grace in what he gives. In week two, Nate helped us deepen the connection between the character of God and his gifts. And last week we examined the all-encompassing nature of the command for gratitude.

From 1 Thessalonians 5, we learned that gratitude is both a command and a lifestyle. It’s a Christian perspective on life that sees God’s grace in everything—even when life is hard or painful.

In light of the gospel, Christians are to be full of gratitude—like muscle memory.

Grumbling: Gratitude Malfunction

But let's be honest. That doesn't always happen, does it? I chose this series and placed it in the middle of advent for a reason. The fact is: human beings are prone toward ingratitude. And we learned how this is connected to idolatry and immorality. Idolatry uses God's gifts to worship ourselves. Immorality seeks satisfaction outside of God's gifts.

This week I want to dig a little deeper. I want to address a very common—often tolerated— expression of ingratitude. It's the issue of grumbling.

You cannot read the Old Testament and the story of God's people without finding a consistent struggle with idolatry, immorality, and grumbling. Today, I want to take you on a survey of this issue and give you some strategies for combating grumbling. We'll look at this with three "P's": the pattern, problem, and prescription.

Pattern

A quick survey of the Old Testament would show us how frequently God's people struggled with the issue of grumbling. Let me show you a number of examples. Then we'll work on a definition of the problem.

Our text this morning is only one well-known example where grumbling emerges. This passage records the panic that Israel fell into over the absence of food after God delivered them from Egypt. If you flip back in your Bible from chapter 16, you'll see what happened previously:

- Chapters 7-11 record the first 9 plagues
- Chapter 12 is the Passover and final plague— the death of the firstborn
- Chapter 13 tells of God leading his people to the Red Sea by a cloud and pillar of fire
- Chapter 14 tells of the Red Sea is splitting, the people crossing over, and Pharaoh and his army drowning
- Chapter 15 records an incredible song of praise and thanksgiving called "The Song of Moses"

Immediately after all of this, the people fall into a familiar pattern of grumbling:

"And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Ex. 16:2–3).

This was not the first time the people of Israel fell into this pattern. The book of Exodus records multiple incidents prior to this moment.

At the brink of the Red Sea with Pharaoh pursuing the people, Exodus 14:10-13 records the following:

"When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the

LORD. ¹¹ They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” ¹³ And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again” (Ex. 14:10–13).

And it didn’t stop there. Even after the deliverance through the Red Sea, it only took three days for the people to fall into the same pattern.

“Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. ²⁴ And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink” (Ex. 15:22–24)

Exodus is not the only book that records this repeated pattern. The book of Numbers highlights grumbling as well.

Miriam and Aaron grumble against Moses’ leadership when he takes a wife from Ethiopia (Cushite).

“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. ² And they said, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the Lord heard it” (Num. 12:1–2).

When the nation is about to enter the Promised Land, they send in spies. Some of you will remember that ten of the twelve spies provided a bad report. The people panicked and grumbled.

“Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 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! ³ Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” ⁴ And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt” (Num. 14:1–4).

The effect of this disaster was another forty years of wilderness wandering. No one alive was allowed to enter the promised land except Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who offered good reports and didn’t grumble.

The final example I’ll give you is in Numbers 21. After the judgment of the wilderness, the people still didn’t learn their lesson.

“From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶ Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the

people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live (Num. 21:4–9)”

This example is noteworthy because lifting the bronze serpent becomes a model for the crucifixion of Jesus (John 3:14). And yet the sin behind this deliverance is none other than grumbling.

These six texts help us to see the familiar pattern of God’s people with the issue of grumbling.

Problem

As we walked through those passages, I trust that you saw more than just the pattern of grumbling. We also get a sense of the nature of the problem. In other words, there’s a problem in this pattern. It relates to the people’s relationship with God.

Back in Exodus 16, we read these words from Moses to the people:

“So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “At evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against the Lord. For what are we, that you grumble against us?” ⁸ And Moses said, “When the Lord gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the Lord has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord” (Ex. 16:6–8).

We need to recognize that grumbling is not merely a problem with our words. It’s not just saying too much or being too negative. Grumbling is a God problem. As I’ll show you in a moment, grumbling is ultimately connected to unbelief.

Gratitude takes what is received (grace) and says, “Thanks! This is a good gift from you.” Grumbling is the opposite. It receives and accuses God of things that aren’t true about him. Rather than being full of faith, grumbling heads down the path of fear, doubt, slander, undermining, and questioning; and it gives birth to unbelief.

For those of you who think this is merely an Old Testament issue, Paul connects the dots for us in 1 Corinthians 10. He links the Old Testament stories with idolatry, grumbling, and our need to listen.

“For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. ⁶ Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of

them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents,¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:1–12).

Do you see the connection here between grumbling, immorality, and idolatry? They are not merely sin issues. They are sinful manifestations of a lack of gratitude.

I’ve said all of this to help you see the issue as important. I think the greatest barrier to winning the battle with grumbling is seeing it as enormously problematic. The normalization and the minimization of grumbling are huge hindrances in dealing with this issue. So, if you can simply take the first step in realizing the seriousness of grumbling, that would be a great step. Recognizing that grumbling is a problem is very important.

We’ve yet to define grumbling. Let’s try. Scott Hubbard, in his article entitled *Do Everything Without Grumbling*, says:

“Grumbling is discontentment made audible – the heart’s contempt escaped through the mouth. It’s the sound we make when we have “a strong craving” for something we don’t have, and we being to grow restless.”¹

Grumbling emerges when our desires become misplaced—when we become dissatisfied with God’s provision or his timing. If we don’t recognize it and turn from it, grumbling grows. Hubbard continues:

“‘Unfair,’ says some voice within us. ‘That’s not right,’ says another. Desires become expectations; expectations become rights. And instead of bringing our disappointment to God, and allowing his words to steady us, we let unmet desire fester into discontentment...We grumble because we have diligently listened to a voice other than the Lord our God’s, and have begun to repeat the words. Instead of crying out to God, ‘Help me trust you are good!’ we mutter and spill and vent—the equivalent of saying, ‘God, your ways are not good.’”²

When something happens in your life, the question is whether or not you are going to see it in light of what you know to be true about God’s character and his promises. Over and over again, the people of God embraced the downward spiral of grumbling which ultimately leads to unbelief.

In looking at the examples in the Scripture, here’s the grumbling “death spiral”:

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/do-everything-without-grumbling>

² Ibid.

- **Misplaced Desires** – we have expectations, longings, cravings—some good and some sinful. But we allow them to live unchecked.
- **Exaggerated words** – grumbling involves words that forget the past, refuse to remember, live in the moment, and express our fear or outrage. It’s one thing to be nervous or upset; it’s another for contempt to slip through our mouths.
- **Blame others** – Whether it’s God or another human being (Ex. leader, spouse, friend, boss, co-worker), grumbling is the verbal expression of bitterness; it seeks to find blame at someone’s feet.
- **Groupthink** – Grumblers don’t travel alone. They need others to both hear their grumbles and amplify them. Usually, grumblers attract other grumblers. Conclusions are drawn—together.
- **Unbelief** – the final step in the death spiral of grumbling is a failure to really believe what’s true

Can you think of times when you’ve fallen into the trap of grumbling? Do you see the progression of this downward spiral? Some of you are so familiar with this spiral, you actually have come to believe it’s normal. Or you call it venting, being honest, getting something off your chest, or sharing a concern/prayer request.

“Grumbling is the hum of the fallen human heart, and often a hallmark of Christian’s indwelling sin.”³

This is the tragic pattern that marked the people of God during many moments in their lives. Grumbling led to many consequences. It’s a familiar problem.

Prescription

So, what do we do about grumbling? How do battle this very familiar sin issue?

1. Reflect

The problem with grumbling is how quickly it happens—almost without any thinking. Grumbling is a mouth and heart with no filter. So, the first thing you can do is stop and think. Ask yourself a few questions:

- What do I want right now?
- What am I afraid of?
- Why am I using these words?
- What if they were recorded?

When we grumble, we say foolish things! It is helpful for us to stop talking and start reflecting.

2. Remember

The remedy in Philippians 4:12-16 is to remember God’s grace in our lives (“work out your salvation”) and to hold fast to the word of life. In the Old Testament, the people kept forgetting what God had done

³ Ibid.

for them. Immediately after the Red Sea parts, the people fall into grumbling. They counted the works of God as less relevant to their lives as the fear that was in front of them.

Christians need to anchor their hope in the steadfast love of the Lord (Lam. 3:22-24). We need to remember that if God did not spare his own son, will he not also with him graciously give us all things (Rom. 8:32). We remember that the Lord promised to supply our every need according to the riches of Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19).

You combat grumbling by remembering the gospel. You defeat the death spiral by holding fast to the promises in the Bible.

3. Rejoice

Grumbling needs space in which to operate. It needs neurons, tongues, ears, and friends. Fill all of those with gratitude so that there's less and less room for grumbling. Talk to God about what's wrong. And thank him for all that he has done. Sing songs to him. Read the psalms. If your object of grumbling involves people, practice the art of affirmation—thanking God for the grace that you see in them. Focus on how God is at work in them, not their deficits.

Let rejoicing be your first step when a difficult circumstance comes your way. Turn what could be a step toward the grumbling death spiral to a moment of gratitude.

In order to be a people that embraces the power of gratitude, we also need to be wary of the problematic pattern of grumbling.

When you see grace, say thanks—always. Especially when you are tempted to grumble.

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