

Miscellaneous

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.
(1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10 ESV)

Grumbling and Grace

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Numbers 21:4-9

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Numbers 21:4-9.

As Pastor Paul mentioned last week, we will be moving into our new series in September, but we thought this space in between might be a great opportunity for us to stop and reflect. What is God teaching us in this season?

Though it doesn't always feel like it, adversity can be a gift. There are lessons that are learned in seasons of trial that simply can't be learned anywhere else. We've experienced something of a "stress test" over the last six months, have we not? We'd be fools if we didn't stop to analyze what this test has revealed in us. How is your marriage really? How is your spiritual life? What strengths and weaknesses did we see in our congregation? What challenges do we need to prepare for in the future?

I wholeheartedly agree with Pastor Paul's assessment from last week. The past six months have revealed that unity in the church is not something that we can simply take for granted. It's something that, by the grace of God and with the help of the Holy Spirit we will have to FIGHT for in the coming months and years. The thief comes to steal, to kill and to destroy and he knows

that a house divided against itself can't stand. The primary concern in my heart right now is for unity.

However, as I drop down to the next tier of urgency, there's another issue that this crisis has revealed. It would appear to me that the North American church has developed a grumbling problem.

Grumbling is a very dangerous sin, because it's the kind of sin that goes under the radar. It's the kind of sin that you tolerate and even become numb to. Before you know it, you can't talk about your job, your church, your marriage or your kids without complaining about all of the ways that these things and people fall short of your expectations. We call that guy the "glass-half-empty" type. The Bible calls him a sinner. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says to the church in Corinth:

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. (1 Corinthians 10:8-11 ESV)

Notice something with me: The sin of grumbling and the sin of sexual immorality are placed on the same list! It would appear that God takes our grumbling very seriously. In this text, the Apostle Paul alludes back a story in the Old Testament about grumbling. He tells us to lean in and listen, because that story was written down as an example for our instruction.

So, we're going to heed the Apostle's advice and we're going to do just that this morning. I hope your Bibles are open to Numbers 21. We're going to read from verses 4-9. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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. (Numbers 21:4-9 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

God was so displeased with the grumbling that He heard that He sent a brood of vipers into the camp. The text tells us that many of the Israelites DIED that day! That was a SEVERE response! And, according to the Apostle Paul, this story was recorded as an example for us. So, let's consider this example and ask ourselves the question:

Why Does God Deal So Severely With Our Grumbling?

Let's be honest, if your Canadian neighbor read this story, she would likely come away saying: “Well, that seems like an overreaction on God’s part. The punishment doesn’t seem to fit the crime. The Israelites didn’t KILL anyone! They were just whining and complaining!”

But that's exactly why the Apostle Paul would have us come back to this story. We don't take the sin of grumbling very seriously. But, as we see here, God does. Why is that? First of all, God deals severely with our grumbling:

1. Because grumbling insults the wisdom and generosity of God

In verse 4 we are told that the Israelites were travelling AROUND the land of Edom. What they wanted was to march right THROUGH Edom on the King’s Highway. And that makes sense. It would have saved them time and energy. They politely asked the King of Edom for passage and he responded by marching his entire army out to the gate.

Rather than engaging in battle with the Edomites, Moses led his people the long way around. And they grew impatient. “Why didn’t Moses stand up to the King of Edom? Why didn’t God simply turn the King’s heart? If He could part the Red Sea and lead us through on dry ground, then surely, He could have made a way for us to avoid this laborious detour.” They allowed their impatience to overflow into full-fledged grumbling. They complained to 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.” (Numbers 21:5b ESV)

This is a very *human* scene, isn’t it? The Israelites are hungry, tired and frustrated. So, they begin to lash out.

But who are they lashing out at?

They think they are attacking Moses. “YOU brought us out of Egypt.” The first thing we do when things don’t go our way is we throw stones at leaders. That’s always been part of the human story. “This is YOUR fault. All of my problems are the result of YOUR lousy leadership!”

The grumbling then shifted from leaders to circumstances. That’s always step two. “We have no food and no water, and we’re forced to eat this WORTHLESS food!” The worthless food that they are referring to here is, of course, manna. God miraculously fed his people with bread from heaven while they wandered in the wilderness, but in this moment of anger, they told God how they really felt. “This food is WORTHLESS!” Commentator Ronald Allen notes:

In their styling the “bread of heaven” as something vile and despicable, the people were actually contemning the Lord its giver.¹

Who commissioned Moses to lead the Israelites? God did. Who sent them into the wilderness to wander for 40 years? God did. Who led them to Edom but then caused them to walk the long way around? Who was responsible for their food and water? Who gave them bread from heaven? GOD DID!

Every time the Israelites THOUGHT that they were grumbling against an earthly leader or a present circumstance, they were actually insulting the wisdom and generosity of GOD! If the shortcut through Edom had of been the correct route, He would have opened that door! But He didn’t, because it wasn’t. If the Israelites needed more food, He would have given them more food. But He didn’t, because they had all that they needed.

¹ Ronald B. Allen, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Genesis - Numbers)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 2, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 876.

I think the application here is easy to see: The next time you want to grumble about your Prime Minister, your marriage, your circumstances, your changed plans, your lack of sleep, your employment uncertainty, you take a minute and remind yourself that God is Lord over every one of those things. You watch your tongue. You be careful how you speak to Him.

Now, hear me say this: It's one thing to come humbly before the Lord and to say, "God, I am not enjoying my circumstances and I can't see what You're doing in all of this." We find that prayer ALL OVER the Psalms. That's appropriate. It's another thing entirely for you to say in your anger and your arrogance, "God, I hate what You're doing, I hate the leadership You've provided, and I deserve better." THAT is grumbling.

Grumbling insults the wisdom and generosity of God.

Second, God deals so severely with our grumbling:

2. Because our grumbling betrays a lack of faith

The Israelites asked: "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?" But, that's not a question – that's an ACCUSATION. Essentially, what they were saying was: "I don't believe anymore that what You have in store for me is better than what I have left behind."

Their grumbling was a faith issue.

They had already heard the report of the spies that had scouted the promised land. There was enormous fruit and there was milk and honey and pastures for their flocks. There was FREEDOM to live as God's people and to enjoy God's presence and provision! The land that God had promised to them was better than anything that they had EVER known in Egypt! But the road to that blessed life was a difficult road. And as the difficulties began to accumulate – as the Israelites faced the "stress test" – they were forced to ask the question: Do we really believe God's promise?

Do you? Do you believe that that which lies ahead is better than that which you left behind?

Christian don't forget where you came from. You were a slave to sin. You were on the road to death and ruin. Yes, it was easier. Yes, in that life, you could indulge all of your selfish desires and enjoy all of the comforts that this world has to offer. Yes. But remember what Jesus said:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and **the way is hard that leads to life**, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13-14 ESV)

The way is HARD that leads to life. Jesus said that!

You will only persevere through the HARD stuff if you believe that God's blessing is on the other side of your hardships. Listen: The challenges that you're facing today may persist until the end of your life. I know that's not fun to hear, but it's the truth. And that's HARD, isn't it? Jesus said that it would be! He never promised perfect health, or a perfect marriage, or a perfect bank account in this life. But he promised a GLORIOUS kingdom in the next. So, when your health fails, your marriage falters and your savings dwindle, don't shake your fist at God and say: "You tricked me! My old life was BETTER!"

The blessing He has in store for you still lies ahead, and it is better than anything that you left behind. It's easy to pretend that you believe that on a sunny day. But now the storm has come. Do you believe Him now? He tells us:

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17 ESV)

It's a difficult path. It is! But it is preparing you for eternal GLORY! So, don't grumble. Grumbling betrays a lack of faith.

Finally, God deals so severely with our grumbling:

3. Because grumbling is a destructive habit that is not easily broken

Destructive addictions require serious interventions. So it is with grumbling.

I want you to do a little exercise with me. Flip back in your Bibles to Exodus 14. Here, the Israelites are sandwiched between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea. In verse 11, they cry out:

"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." (Exodus 14:11-12 ESV)

And how did God respond? He parted the Red Sea, and He miraculously delivered His people from their pursuers. Lesson learned, right? Well, flip ahead to the next chapter. Look at Exodus 15:23-24:

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?" (Exodus 15:23-24 ESV)

More grumbling. This time, God responds to their grumbling by making the bitter water sweet. Once again, God shows Himself as faithful to His people. But, did they learn their lesson? Turn to the next chapter and read verses 2-3 with me:

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."
(Exodus 16:2-3 ESV)

MORE grumbling! So, God gave them bread from Heaven to eat in the mornings and He even caused quail to fall from the sky in the evening. Fresh bread and meat in the wilderness! Amazing! But THAT wasn't enough. Turn to the NEXT chapter now and look at Exodus 17:1-3:

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?"³ But the people thirsted there for water, **and the people grumbled against Moses** and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exodus 17:1-3 ESV)

So, God graciously gave them water from the rock.

THAT is the backstory that leads to today's text. After God displayed His provision and mercy and faithfulness time and time again the Israelites cry out: "Why did we EVER trust God and leave Egypt? We're sick of this WORTHLESS food." The addiction to grumbling needed to be broken. I appreciated what one commentator wrote:

There is a pattern to complaining; it is habit-forming. The tendency among people is to go beyond where one left off the last time, to become ever more egregious, ever more outspoken. Rarely does a complaining person become milder in his complaints.²

Because it's never enough, is it? Not for the complainer. The grumbler always feels like he deserves a little more. A bigger salary, more respect, more sleep, more opportunities, more rest, more leisure; and every day he becomes more and more convinced that he's entitled to complain.

Is that you? I lament to say that is me. And it's a despicable sin. And it needs to stop.

God took serious measures to root this sin out of the Israelites. He had heard enough of their grumbling, so He gave them something to grumble about. And it worked! As commentator Gordon Wenham notes:

This is the last recorded occasion that Israel grumbled about their food and yearned for the delicacies of Egypt.³

God deals seriously with our grumbling because it is a habit that is not easily broken. I pray that this is a refining season for those of us who are inclined to complain.

On the first Sunday that we were allowed to gather back together, I was a grumbler. In my heart I was saying, "I don't even know why we're starting services back up. We can't sing. We can't hug one another. We can't linger and talk in the parking lot. We have to wear masks. We'd be better off staying home."

² Ronald B. Allen, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Genesis - Numbers)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 2, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 876.

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 4; IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 176.

But then I got here, and I watched as my brothers and sisters made their way through the parking lot with their Bibles in hand, hungry to hear the Word of the Lord. And as the service began, we all clapped and waved our flags and tears filled my eyes because I realized what a **TREMENDOUS PRIVILEGE** it is to be in the house of the Lord!

And then I was reminded that there are Christians living in persecuted nations around the world who would give **ANYTHING** just for **ONE** day of gathering in God's house with God's people. To hear the Word preached without fear of violent persecution is a privilege they might never experience in this life. I have had it **SO GOOD** in North America for so long that I wanted to complain like a petulant child when my cozy life got a little less cozy for a short season. I'm embarrassed by that. I repent of that. And I suspect I'm not the only one who needs to do some repenting.

Grumbling is sin. Grumbling is serious. God struck down the Israelites for their grumbling.

But, thankfully, this same story that condemns us also reminds us of the grace of God. So, very quickly now, let's ask one last question of our text:

How Can A Grumbler Receive Grace?

If that's you – if you are realizing this morning that you have been sinning against the Lord with your grumbling – then first, you need to:

1. Confess your sin

We see that in verse 7:

And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. (Numbers 21:7a ESV)

Those are powerful words, aren't they?

We have sinned.

Don't downplay it. Don't justify it. Just own it and turn from it. I have sinned.

I have robbed You of glory with my complaining. There are people in the world now who think less of You because of the things that I have said in my grumbling. They think it's a burden to follow You. They think the gospel has no power to change people. They think slavery to sin is better than freedom in Christ because they have listened to my incessant complaining. I grumbled because I didn't trust Your plan. I grumbled because I loved my comforts more than I loved You. I grumbled because the road seemed too hard and I felt You were demanding too much from me. I HAVE SINNED.

That's step one.

But don't stop there. Next:

2. Call upon your Mediator

We see that in the second half of verse 7:

Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. (Numbers 21:7b ESV)

Freshly aware of their sin, and freshly aware of God's righteous anger towards sin, the Israelites knew that they needed help. So, they asked Moses to speak to God on their behalf. Matthew Henry observes:

They beg the prayers of Moses for them, as conscious to themselves of their own unworthiness to be heard, and convinced of the great interest which Moses had in heaven.⁴

⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. 6 vols.; (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 4119.

True repentance is always accompanied by true humility. No one who has genuinely become aware of their sin feels worthy to stand before the God of Heaven. You've probably heard me tell this story numerous times now, but on the day that God opened my eyes to see my sin I was wrecked. I was weeping and lying face down on the floor for over an hour. I couldn't get low enough, because I was so keenly aware of how awful my sin was and how holy our God is. But it was there, lying on the floor, where God finally helped me to understand why I needed Jesus. I can't stand before the throne of a holy God, but JESUS CAN! My sin separates me from God, but Jesus NEVER sinned so HE'S not separated from God! And Jesus loves me, this I know! For the Bible tells me so! So I called on the name of my Mediator – I called on the name of the One who is seated at the Father's hand and who is ever interceding for His people – I called out to Jesus and He heard my cry!

No matter how far you have fallen – no matter how divided and separated from God you feel – if you confess your sin, there is a way for you to come before the throne of grace. Jesus said:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
(John 14:6 ESV)

Finally, if you want to receive grace this morning, this text teaches us to:

3. Trust in God's provision

Isn't it odd that God commands Moses to fashion a bronze serpent for the Israelites to look at? Why wouldn't He have him fashion the image of a dove? Or some kind of medicinal plant? Or, better yet, why not have no image at all? After all, the Israelites had shown a propensity to worship graven images in the past. Wasn't it risky to have them look at this bronze serpent?

But in order to be cured from this judgement, God commanded His people to look up and behold the consequence for their sin. They had to behold the very curse of sin itself. So, Moses fashioned an image in the likeness of the serpent. And as they looked in faith, they were healed.

And so it is for us today. If we would be forgiven of our sin – if we would receive God's grace – then we are called to look in faith to the place where the penalty for our sin was on full display.

Jesus said:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:14-15 ESV)

There is grace for complainers and grumblers. But that grace came at a great cost. We are forgiven because Jesus was forsaken. He took all of the venom that we rightly deserved. He took the wrath and the justice and the vengeance of God against our sin and he bore it in his own body on the cross.

The person who has never seen the heinousness of his sin or the holiness of our God doesn't understand the cross. He mocks it. He calls it a barbaric, outdated sign. He looks for salvation in his own self-improvement. He looks for salvation in the advancements of modern man. The Son of God bearing the sin of the world on the cross looks like foolishness to him. Martyn Lloyd Jones once said:

The gospel is annoying to the natural man and makes him hate it because it proposes a way to him that seems to him to be utterly contemptible and ridiculous.⁵

Of course, Dr. Lloyd Jones was simply summarizing what the Apostle Paul had already warned us:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18 ESV)

Would you be healed? Christ is lifted up before your eyes today. Will you look to him and be saved?

But whoever looked up to this healing sign, though from the outmost part of the camp, though with a weak and weeping eye, was certainly healed; so whosoever believes in Christ, though as yet but weak in faith, shall not perish.⁶

⁵ Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 137.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. 6 vols.; (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 4123.

Our grumbling – our faithlessness – our sin – needs to stop. We have been called to walk a narrow, dangerous, difficult road, but it ends in GLORY friends! It ends in glory! So, don't grow weary of doing good. Don't give an inch to a grumbling spirit. Give thanks in all circumstances.

This is the path that God has chosen for us. These are the circumstances He has ordained for us. Because this is the way home. And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.