

...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

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Stop Complaining

by Paul Anderson

Not an easy assignment. It doesn't qualify as sin, does it, certainly not as serious as lying or gossip? It seems rather natural. When you wake up with a headache, when it rains on your picnic, when you're given an assignment you hate, or when your friend forgets to pick you up—complaining almost seems appropriate. It comes out of the mouth—unsolicited.

Apparently Paul didn't think so. He told his friends in Philippi, "Do everything without complaining or arguing" (Phil. 2:14). I had read it dozens of times, and it had never phased me. But recently, as I was preparing to teach this happy letter at The Master's Institute seminary, I was apprehended by the words. "I'm guilty," I confessed. I don't picture myself as a whiner. I try to walk with a positive outlook, so I had managed to escape the apostle's admonition for years. Not this time. I was pulled up short and acknowledged that complaining slipped into my speech all too often and that I didn't even recognize it enough to repent. Optimists are surprised

to find out that they stand among the grumblers much more than they realize. We feel equipped to evaluate how God is doing in a brother or sister's life (or how He is not doing), how He messed up with the weather today, or how He overlooked important

details in our bumpy life. We may not appear crass to others, but God gets the point, and He doesn't like it.

Paul told the Philippi saints that they needed to rejoice rather than to complain. The man who endured more hardships in a year than we will likely face in a lifetime

has permission to speak. When he says, "Rejoice always," he commands our attention. When he turns a prison sentence into an opportunity to evangelize Caesar's palace or when he turns a beating into the start of a new church, we're all ears. Or at least we should be.

He calls us to an impeccable standard. He doesn't say, "Try your best not to squawk." He says, "Don't ever do it." Why? "So that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation" (v. 15). He doesn't aim at mediocrity. You don't need grace to achieve "average." But to tame the tongue, which James calls impossible, requires heaven's power.

So at dinner recently I asked the family what they tend to complain about. I wanted them to stand guard over their minds and mouths when the temptation arose. Here are some responses:

- I complain when my siblings ask me to do something I don't want to do.
- I complain when I feel that I can do better than someone else who was asked rather than me.
- I complain when I find myself in over my head and complain rather than asking for help.

Why do we complain, or as the King James says, "murmur"? It is giving expression to the pride in our hearts that hollers, "I deserve better." It allows us to stand in judgment of people—and of God Himself. It gives us a convenient excuse in the event that we fail. We can always blame it on bad circumstances, on our health, or on our team.



"Do everything without complaining or arguing"

Philippians 2:14



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It doesn't require the work of the Spirit to whine; anyone can do it. But to take adverse circumstances and turn them around, to overcome evil with good, that's a trick. How easily we justify our crabbing, as if we have every right to gripe. We poison the atmosphere with negativism, turning faith to fatalism. We drop a load of harmful chemicals on our friend, tainting him, infecting other people on our way through the day.

Do we expect God to smooth our road? Who are we complaining to? When we grumble about the weather, who takes our report? Do we think that God is not listening? Does He respond favorably to our squawking, as if we can expect Him to quickly change the weather patterns to suit our fancy? Is He on the throne to entertain us? Did His Son die to make life a bit easier to handle? Can we expect Him to soften life for us?

God had just powerfully, miraculously, supernaturally delivered the Israelites from the tyranny of Egypt. They headed for the Promised Land, pitching tents along the way. When you camp out, you rough it. You use make-shift bathrooms, you eat camp-style food, and bugs might end up in your sandwich. That's part of the camping-out experience. But somehow they expected God to spread a table for them. Want to hear them?

"If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt!"

Exodus 16:2



"When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What are we to drink?'" (Ex. 15:23,24).

Next chapter: *"In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death'"* (Ex. 16:2,3).

Next chapter: *"They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses replied, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?' But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses"* (Ex. 17:1-3).

And again when spies came back and gave a bad report of the land: *"All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, 'If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?'"* (Nu. 14:2,3). Did the Lord appreciate their whining? He said, *"How long will this wicked community grumble against me?...In this desert your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty*

years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me" (v.27,29). He also said, *"Not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times (God is counting)—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it"* (v. 22,23).



When Moses gave the new generation a history lesson before calling them to their destiny, he declared, *"You grumbled in your tents and said, 'The Lord hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us'"* (Deut. 1:27). Several truths surface from the whining of the wanderers:

1. They were complaining against God. All grumbling ultimately ends at the throne—where the buck stops.
2. Complaining often turns into lying. Complainers are not usually interested in truth, only in expressing their discontent.
3. "If only's" usually lead to grumbling, like "If only we had died in Egypt." Are you living with any "if only's"? They consign you to live in the past, to what could have been, should have been, might have been—but isn't. "If only's" suck the faith out of life and keep you from moving positively into the future. They make you relentlessly trace over your steps like you are looking for lost keys, rehearsing the past rather than focusing on the future.

If only it had not rained.

If only we didn't get into that accident.

If only I had passed my test.

If only he had not divorced me.

If only I had gone into the medical field.

If only our business had not failed.

If only my health had held up.

4. The grumbling brought serious consequences. No sin is described in the Bible as making God angry for forty years—except complaining. God doesn't simply say that they displayed a negative attitude. He calls them "wicked." He says that they treated Him with contempt. Doesn't sound like one of the lighter sins to me.



The psalmist picked up the same theme as he reviewed Israel's history: *"In the desert they gave in to their craving; in the wasteland they put God to the test...Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe his promise. They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the Lord. So he swore to them with uplifted hand (like making a vow) that he would make them fall in the desert... By the waters of Meribah they angered the Lord, and trouble came to Moses because of them"* (Ps. 106:14,24-26,32).

Looking back on the Israelites, Paul wrote, *"We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel"* (1 Cor. 10:9,10). Bottom line: *"God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert"* (v. 5). Call it an understatement—God was irate. He finally swore, "Okay, no one goes into the Land." Joshua and Caleb were the two exceptions to a nation of whiners. *"For forty years I [God] was angry with that generation; I said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not know my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest'"* (Ps. 95:10,11).

Then the writer of Hebrews gives them a chapter for one final dishonorable mention. How embarrassing to be sprinkled through the Book for something most of us hardly even take time to repent of. Being angry for four decades is a long time! Sounds like God doesn't do well with grumblers, like maybe we should reconsider how serious our complaining really is.

It is not complaining:

- To cry out to God in your misery.
- To acknowledge to God that someone dumped on you.
- To confront wrong in an appropriate way.

It is complaining:

- To beef about the weather or a bad driver.
- To complain about your condition rather than turning it into a prayer.
- To make illegitimate remarks about another person for whom you are not responsible.

We are guilty. When we talked about it at dinner one night, we then stopped and prayed for a better response.

Naomi, however, said, "God, I am sorry for complaining." How appropriate for all of us to begin there. Before we set out to change our bad habit, let us clear the floor with confession. We have left a trail of bitterness, sliming the path with whimpering. And rather than stopping to confess to God or apologizing to our friends for implicating them in our "misdemeanors," we plow through and continue the damage. The smog-filled air rises out of poisonous emissions from our dissatisfied hearts.

The psalmist wrote, *"I said, I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin"* (Ps. 39:1). Problem is: *"No man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison"* (Js. 3:8). We need to live from the inside out rather than being controlled by our circumstances. We are being lived, not living, if we can react only to external stimuli. But if we rise above our circumstances, we show that we truly are seated in heavenly places. What happens in us trumps what happens to us. Circumstances often come as tests to see where our heart is fixed. If we react to unfortunate circumstances, we are proving that we needed the test—and a few more. In truth, our lives do not have to be determined by what happens to us. Paul proved that divine responses to human situations will convert them into God-opportunities.



"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Period.

Psalm 23:1



One answer to complaining is contentment. Paul wrote to his Philippian friends, *"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation"* (Ph. 4:12). You won't find that man whining. He won't say to the Creator, "Why did you make me like this?" (Ro. 9:20). *"If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that"* (1 Tim. 6:8). Contentment is not a "have a nice day" philosophy. It is rugged confidence in the face of obstacles, daring to believe that God controls our lives and our destinies. It recognizes that God has provided all that we need. We don't wish we are someone we are not, somewhere we are not, doing something we are not, with someone we are not with. *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."* Period. Assuming the value of holy discontent, I am satisfied with who I am, what I am, where I am, what I have, and who I have.

When the Word commands something impossible, like never complaining, it stands as an invitation to trust. So after confessing my whining, I boldly declared, "By your empowering grace I will never complain again." Maybe you'd like to do the same!

*"A person's words can be life-giving water;
words of true wisdom are as refreshing as a
bubbling brook."*

Proverbs 18:4 (NLT)



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