

Complaint Department

:: march 2, 2008 ::

There's this car that has entered my life recently. Our apartment building is pretty typical; we have covered parking stalls that sort of surround the perimeter of the apartment units. Well, this car that has recently come into my life likes to pull up and park about 1 or 2 feet away from the curb outside of the apartment that they are visiting. Happens a couple times a week.

The problem is that when they're parked there it makes it a bit difficult for me to get into my parking space. Not impossible, just more difficult. So I've been complaining about it to Kelly and I've been day-dreaming about what I could do to this car that has recently entered my life if I had limitless assets.

Let's talk about complaining this morning. It is usually quite common for us. We find ourselves complaining about a slacker at work or the presidential candidates or the car that has recently come into our lives.

If you've been reading along in our through-the-Bible-in-one-year-schedule you have encountered a very powerful verse on the subject of complaining.

Numbers 11.1a – Now when the people complained, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it.

This is why it is so important for we as Christians to study through the entire Bible regularly: because God has things to say to us concerning our every day lives. He desires to talk to us about parenting, about working, about ministry, about our marriages, about the future, even about **complaining!** The reason God has given us His word is that we might **know** it and **carry** it with us and meditate on it each and every day.

This morning we're going to look at a section in the book of Numbers where God's people were complaining. It didn't happen only in this section, or only in the book of Numbers. In fact, from the book of Exodus to the book of Deuteronomy, during the time of the wilderness wanderings, we are continually seeing God's people complaining, whining, standing up against Moses, rejecting his leadership and sinning against God.

But the section in Numbers we are looking at this morning really reveals to us what complaining can do to us and how it appears to our God, who loves us and wants to work in our lives for good.

Numbers 11.1 – Now when the people complained, it displeased the LORD; for the LORD heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp.

The first thing we learn about complaining: **Complaining Displeases The Lord**. Why was God angry? After all, Nehemiah proclaims that our God is ‘ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness,’¹ so why this anger?

Complaining is sinful. Paul wrote to the Philippians and said, ‘do all things without complaining.’² It’s pretty simple; when we complain, we’re sinning. The problem is, complaining is one of those sins that we’re not too worried about. Well, **worrying** is one of those things we’re not too worried about either. There are certain attitudes, certain behaviors that God has spoken to us about that we ignore, that we sort of write off.

Gossip is one. Talking badly about our leaders is one. Worrying is one. **Complaining** is one. The reason God wants us to avoid this stuff is two-fold: it causes us trouble and it presents a bad witness of Him to the world.

And so the Lord heard their complaining and He disciplined the people. It may seem severe, it may shock us that God ended the lives of some of these complainers, but what He was **doing** with the children of Israel was serious. It had eternal value. It was important.

The same is true for God’s people today. What we’re doing and what God wants to do with us is serious. It is important. That is why God does not just leave us alone to our own weakness, our own sinfulness. He gets intimately involved with us **because** He loves us, **because** He wants to use us and grow us. So this discipline may seem harsh to us, but, as the Bible says, those the Lord loves, He chastens.³ So what happened next?

Numbers 11.2 – Then the people cried out to Moses, and when Moses prayed to the Lord, the fire was quenched.

The people make a mistake here; they cry out to Moses, not to God. You see, throughout the wilderness wanderings the people had a real problem with focusing only on the temporal, only on the human level, only on the here and now. And though God had worked dozens of miracles in their midst, though His presence was visible to all of these people in the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud, they failed to turn to Him in repentance, they failed to turn to Him when in need. Instead they just kept focusing on themselves, focusing on the here and now and they started giving into their weaknesses, they started complaining, they started sinning. They should’ve been crying out to **God** to forgive them for their complaining, but instead they cried out to Moses: “Make things better for us, fix our problem.” It was just another type of complaint.

*Numbers 11.4-6 – Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving ; so the children of Israel also wept again and said, ‘who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate **freely** in Egypt, the **cucumbers**, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except **this manna** before our eyes!’”*

¹ Nehemiah 9.17

² Philippians 2.14

³ Hebrews 12.6

Don't be fooled, **Complaining Deceives Us**. Jeremiah told us that 'the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?'⁴ When we give into complaining, we deceive ourselves because we are giving in to our deceitful, wicked hearts.

As an aside this morning, we need to remind ourselves that our natural heart is out to ruin our relationship with God. The flesh, the old man, the sin nature desires to destroy your walk with Jesus Christ. That's why these seemingly minor issues like gossip or worry or complaining are so important, because they are a small thing that effects the core of our lives.

Do you see what the people were saying? They said that 'we were **free** in Egypt. There were **cucumbers** in Egypt! CUCUMBERS!' When we complain we start convincing ourselves that things **used** to be 'better.' Things **could** be 'better.' Things **should** be 'better.' It takes our focus off of what God wants us to be doing and puts it onto made up memories.

In Egypt the people were slaves. In Egypt the people were beaten. In Egypt the people were subjected. In verses 7 through 9 Moses, the author of Numbers, takes a minute to point out that manna was like pastry, a pastry that was healthy for you. It was like eating a donut and getting all your daily vitamin requirements. And here they are...weeping for cucumbers. Weeping for garlic. Weeping for fish.

You see, complaining **deceives** us and it robs us of the goodness that God has given us. It robs us of what God is trying to do in our lives.

Not only that but in Numbers 11.10-17 we see that **Complaining Discourages Our Leaders**.

Numbers 11.10 - Then Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, everyone at the door of his tent; and the anger of the Lord was greatly aroused; Moses also was displeased.

The first thing we need to recognize is this: it is our nature to complain. That is not a pass. It is our nature to do many things that are contrary to a relationship with Jesus Christ. But these people, who could see the visible presence of God, who had witnessed dozens of miracles, who had been delivered from slavery and who had just witnessed God disciplining complainers went immediately back to complaining. It is part of our flesh, part of that old sin nature that seeks to separate us from God and when we give into it, it **does** separate us from God and it discourages our leaders.

It is pretty remarkable to me that such a small attitude, such a small thing like complaining could be so detrimental to our relationship with Christ, but throughout the Bible we see it doing just that. The good news is that we **can** overcome something like an attitude of complaining. I mean, a little bit of whining is no match for God's Holy Spirit that indwells us and empowers us and guides us, right? But we have to recognize the weakness and allow God to take charge of that area of our life, otherwise we're going to get tripped up, like the children of Israel. Moses got tripped up too.

Moses was under an incredible amount of pressure. He was leading and administering the lives of over 2 million people. And day after day as they came to him and complained, as they came and told him what a terrible job he was doing, as they came asking, 'why don't you do this?' or 'why can't we go there,' as they came to him demanding cucumbers, finally he just loses it. He

⁴ Jeremiah 17.9

has a moment of break down where he calls out to God and says, 'why did You ever ask me to do this?' The complaints of the people discouraged him and eventually **he** gave into complaining as well.

Understandable? Yes. But it still isn't ok. Moses still had to answer to God, who had given him the equipping and the strength necessary to lead this multitude. Moses **was** the right man for the job, he was God's man. His complaining, though understandable, was still wrong and God had to deal with that in Moses' life.

You see after this God said, 'alright Moses. I'll get you some help. Let's get 70 guys and I'll take some of the Spirit I put on you and I will put it on them and they will help you lead the people.'

The application for us has 2 parts. First, don't complain because when we complain it discourages our leaders in the church. Second, don't complain because eventually it will force God to give your job to someone else. That task that God has created you for, that assignment He has been preparing for you from before the foundation of the earth, that is the job you stand to lose when you give into complaining. Eventually He says, 'alright...I'll give the job to someone else,' and we don't want that. We **can** overcome discouragement. We **can** choose to not complain to God about the work He has for us or the ministry He wants us to be a part of.

Back in our story, the people had come and they said, 'we need meat, we have to have it.' And, once again, in verses 18 through 25 we see that **Complaining Brings On Discipline**.

Numbers 11.18-20 – Then you shall say to the people, 'consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying "who will give us meat to eat? For it was well for with us in Egypt." Therefore, the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat, not one day, nor 2 days, nor 10 days, nor 20 days, but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have despised the LORD who is among you and have wept before Him, saying, "why did we ever come up our of Egypt?"'

Here is the plain, Biblical truth: when we complain we are despising God. We're saying that we don't care what He's done for us, we don't care what He's given us, that's all real nice, but we want something different, we want something more. We gotta have those cucumbers! I have to have some leeks!

The question that I have to ask myself is: what would I choose instead of what God has given me? What I mean is this, the people were saying, "yeah God, we see Your presence, we're witnessing Your work, we've been set free from bondage, we've received salvation from the world, but instead of all of that we choose...cucumbers. We choose meat. We choose to go **back** to Egypt."

The point is that our hearts, our sinful hearts, would choose anything over God. Anything. This is why it is SO important for us to keep our complaining in check. To keep those little things that we sometimes ignore under the strict authority of Scripture and God's Holy Spirit. It's so important because, when we don't, the consequences can be huge.

In Numbers 11.31-35, **Complaining Brought Death To The Group**.

Numbers 11.31-33 – Now a wind went out from the Lord, and it brought quail from the sea and left them fluttering near the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and about a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits above the surface of the ground.

*And the people stayed up all that day, all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered **ten homers** [that’s 100 bushels]); and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.*

But, while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was aroused against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague.

Ok, this may confuse us...why did God bring the quail if He was angry when the people ate it? It’s a good question, I’m glad you asked.

God, in His grace and His mercy, presented His people a clear choice. He blew all these quail in around the camp and the people got to choose. Would they stay in the camp and gather the manna or would they journey for a whole day outside of the camp for the quail? Outside of God’s provision, outside of His protection. For those that rejected God, the result was powerful, because they were making a statement. They were coming out and saying, “I reject God’s food and I reject God’s rules, I reject what He has offered us and I reject His principles.” The manna was to be gathered a day at a time...only what you need for your family for each day. And here we see the complainers going out and gathering 100 bushels of quail at a time. They were fully and openly denying God. The result was death.

Don’t forget that our relationship with God is about **life** and **death**. Rejecting God in life brings on eternal death, but even for God’s people, even for Christians, when we reject God, when we choose things over God, when we travel outside of His provision and His protection it means death: death for our families, death for our witness, death for the fruit God has been working on in our lives.

In Numbers 12.1-10 we see that **Complaining Causes Dissention**.

Numbers 12.1-3 – Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman. So they said, ‘has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?’ And the Lord heard it.

(Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.)

This is rough stuff. These were family members! These were people Moses thought he could trust. We have to keep complaining in check because it puts us in opposition with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We have to keep this part of our heart locked down because when we complain we start to think that something is owed us. Right? This is what was happening with Aaron and Miriam. They decided that **they** wanted to have some additional headship, that **they** needed a little more prestige, a little more power, a little more position. And so they’re getting into competition with their ministry leader! We need to be able to trust each other because there’s a lot of work to get done for Jesus Christ.

God’s High Priest and God’s Chosen Leader can not be fighting and wrestling each other for power. This is exactly what Aaron and Miriam were doing and we can tell because look at what

the Word says, it says they came and spoke against Moses because of his Ethiopian wife. So they're starting this complaint, this whisper campaign and when it comes time to make the power play in front of all the people do we see them talking about Moses' wife? No! We see them saying, 'where's **our** due? Where's **our** spiritual prestige?' This has nothing to do with Moses' wife. After all, they had been in the desert quite some time at this point and obviously God had no problem with Moses' wife. It was just the foothold that Aaron and Miriam's complaint had started from. It was that issue that they started thinking about, whining about, telling others about, and it bred dissent in their lives.

Complaining shuts God out of ministry. There is no room for God when we're letting our sinful hearts run the show. And there is no room for pride in God's ministry. Miriam learned this lesson in a rough way.

Skip down to verse 11 where we see that **Complaining Brought Death To The Individual.**

God was not happy about this dissent. So God comes down and He reprimands Aaron and Miriam and then He departed from them and took the cloud of His presence up from the tabernacle. Their complaining had driven God away from the people. And when that happened, Miriam was struck with leprosy. It was a death sentence for her.

Numbers 12.11-13 – So Aaron said to Moses, “oh my lord! Please do not lay this sin on us, in which we have done foolishly and in which we have sinned. Please do not let her be as one dead, whose flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother’s womb!” So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “please heal her, oh God, I pray!”

Moses is an amazing man. He had his shortcomings, he had his outbursts and we know about those, but here he had his heart in check and so he was able to forgive his brother and sister for this great offense. We need to keep our hearts Spirit-led, not flesh-led, so that we **can** do things like hear from God and do His work and forgive others. It's so important, so vital to our growth. Because, as we see in verse 14:

Complaining Causes Delay.

*Numbers 12.14-16 – Then the LORD said to Moses, “if her father had but spit in her face, would she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp seven days, and afterward she may be received again.” So Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days, **and the people did not journey till Miriam was brought in again.** And afterward the people moved...*

I'm not the first person to notice this, but it's important that we remind ourselves of what happened here: one person held back the progress of millions.

There is a truth that we can identify throughout God' Word, whether it is here with Miriam and Aaron or in Acts with Ananias and Sapphira or in various other passages, that when God's people sin individually, it holds back the group. When we complain as individuals, it delays the growth of the church. When we sin in secret it effects our marriages, our children, our friendships, our congregation. Our complaining slows the progress of others. It is a Spiritual truth in God's economy. One person held back the progress of 2 million people.

As we continue in Numbers we see that truth demonstrated again and we see another truth:

Complaining Causes Dread.

For time's sake, we aren't going to read the whole chapter, but in Numbers 13 Moses sends 12 men, 1 from each tribe of Israel, to go and spy out the land of Canaan. We're pretty familiar with the story. They go and for 40 days they survey the land. They study the cities, they assess the strength of the armies, they bring back some fruit.

The men get back to the camp and they give a report to the children of Israel. 2 of the men, Joshua and Caleb, give a great report...that God has removed the protection from the nations, that the land is ripe for the taking, but the other 10 men start complaining. 'There are giants in the land. There are armies in the land. There are fortified cities in the land.' And once again, they take their thoughts and their focus off of God and place it on the earthly, on the mortal, on the natural. And their complaint turns to dread, to despair, to fear. And, like all complaining, it spreads fast through the camp and then the people are filled with dread. And, once again, all that God wants to do for His people and through His people is put on hold.

Now, Numbers 13 points out that these 12 spies were all **leaders** of their families, leaders of their tribes. And here the 10 are ignoring the promises of God, ignoring the provision of God, ignoring God's plan because there are obstacles in their path.

OF COURSE Canaan would have to be conquered, but God had already been fighting for them. He had sent supernatural fear into the armies of the Canaanites. He had sent wasps in to torment the people. The Lord was already driving the people out. He had already won the victory...His people just had to show up. They just had to follow Him.

Instead, these 10 guys, these 10 leaders of the tribes come back and convince their people that it can't be done.

What's so important for us is that we recognize who we are influencing. We influence our spouse, we influence our children, we influence other Christians, we influence our co-workers, our fellow students, strangers we meet on the street...and when we complain we take the focus off of God and onto self, off of heaven and onto earth and that affects the people around us in a very negative way.

Sometimes here in the west we wonder why we don't see more miracles, why we don't see more spiritual activity. It is because too often we are focused on self, rather than on Jesus Christ, on earth rather than heaven. On what **we** want rather than on what **God** wants.

The bottom line, **Complaining Causes Defeat.**

*Numbers 14.1-2 – So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, “if only we had **died** in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had **died** in this wilderness.”*

Do you see what's happening here? It is a mistake for us to think, “oh well, the children of Israel were ALWAYS blowing it...that's not us...that's not me!” Because again and again we're shown that these people **were** just like us. The same weakness. The same temptations. The same God watching over them, speaking to them, loving them.

This focus on self, this attitude of complaint had convinced the people that they would rather die in Egypt than follow God. The days of wanting cucumbers were over, now they're saying, 'hey, I'd rather be dead than follow after God right now.' This is the fruit that a seed of selfishness, a seed of complaint brings forth.

Complaining causes defeat. Defeat in our personal walks with God. Defeat in our families. Defeat in our churches. Complaining makes us selfish. It makes us self-centered. And selfishness is contrary to the Christian life. It is the enemy of God.

The story goes on. The people actually decide that they are **going to go back to Egypt**. They decide that they are going to pick a new leader and they're going to stone Moses and Aaron.

These were the same people who just a few chapters ago were giving abundantly to the work of the tabernacle, people who had to be restrained from giving to God. And now they've bought into the lies of their heart and they're going to kill Moses and go back to the land of slavery.

God intervenes and stops them and the people snap out of it. And that is another thing, **Complaining Forces God To Intervene And Adjust His Plan For Our Lives**. And we don't want that. God has been making plans for our lives from eternity past, and when we force Him to intervene because of our selfishness, because of our sin, then He has to adjust what He is going to do with us, how He is going to use us.

The story of complaining goes on and on in the Old Testament. Complaining is human nature.

Now, I want to be clear on something. We're not talking about struggling in our faith. We're not talking about having questions for God. We're talking about complaining, and I think we know the difference, don't we? All of this isn't to say that our lives aren't difficult sometimes, that we don't go through trials. But when difficulty comes then how will we respond to it? When something isn't going the way we want it to, what are we going to think? What are we going to say? How are we going to react?

When our coworkers are promoted ahead of us are we going to talk badly of them to others? Are we going to tell everyone how much more qualified we are for the job or are we going to rejoice in their blessing and do **our** work as unto the Lord?

When our church doesn't have a type of ministry that we think it should have, what are we going to do about it? Are we going to complain, or are we going to serve God, listen to His leading, see what He wants to do in the situation?

When a car is parked in front of my parking spot, am I going to complain or am I going to bind my heart and crucify the flesh so that God can do with me what He wishes to do with me?

We should be encouraged this morning. Our God desires to speak to us not only of how to get saved, not only a one-time transaction with Him, but He also desires to show us how we can live **every day** in a way that honors Him, in a way that puts us in line with His will. We have a God who desires to give us life and that more abundantly, a God who speaks and moves on our behalf. A God who cares about our thoughts and our desires and a God who says to us, "I care about how you park your car. I care about how you treat your wife. I care about how you live your life."

This week our homework is this: just to complain less. That's it. It's not that hard. Just complain less and see how that effects your prayer life, your family life, your work life. Let's keep our flesh on a shorter leash and see how God desires to grow us, to fill us, to lead us. Amen.