

# Word of Grace

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Exodus 16:1-12

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

***Indeed we do live in a culture of complaint in which people often think they are not complainers (though they are), but everyone else is!***

I want to ask you a question. Robert Hughes has written a book, *The Culture of Complaint*. Do you believe we live in a culture of complaint, a culture of victimology, in which it has become legitimate and normal to complain, to grumble, grouse, gripe and whine about anything and everything? Jack Gordon of Training Magazine once wrote, "Granted that at some time in the past several years we crossed over an invisible line between self-assertion and self-righteousness and turned into a nation of perpetually indignant [people]. Granted that petty intolerance has become a hallmark of American character. Taking umbrage [that is the taking of offense] on behalf of anything and everything has now become a national sport. Never mind religion and politics, touch any of our hair triggers, no matter how inadvertently, and we will do one of two things: lash out with our tails or curl ourselves into indignant little balls." Indeed we do live in a culture of complaint in which people often think they are not complainers (though they are), but everyone else is!

A certain monastery enforced a vow of silence. Each monk could utter only two words every five years, and those two words had to be spoken in the presence of the abbot, the chief monk. One of the

monks, when given his opportunity to speak, said, "Bad food!" Five years later, his two words were, "Bed hard." When given his third opportunity to speak five years later, he said, "I quit." "Well," said the abbot, "you might as well quit. All you've done since you got here is complain!" Ours is certainly not the first culture of complaint!

We are following God's Big Story through the pages of the Bible and considering how our own life stories are part of God's Big Story. Last week, Pastor Pete spoke of that dramatic moment when the Hebrew people led by Moses felt trapped between the onrushing army of Pharaoh of Egypt and the waters of the Red Sea. The Hebrews had seen the miraculous hand of God in the events that caused Pharaoh to let them go, but when caught between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea, they complained like crazy. God divided the waters of the Red Sea and all of God's people made it safely across before the waters closed over the pursuing Egyptian army. They had just participated in an amazing miracle of God, and the story concludes with these words: "Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses" (Exodus 14:31).

Things look great until the very next episode on their journey. "They

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went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter.... And the people complained against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'" (Exodus 15:22-24). Notice they don't ask the God who just parted the Red Sea to do anything. They act as if they have no memory of that miracle. They just complain against their leader. Nevertheless, God cares and gives water.

Their journey continues and again, in the very next story, the one I just read, the whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt...for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:2-3). Once again, they do not remember God's miraculous care for them in the past, yet God is again tenderly caring and literally provides manna bread from heaven. In the very next story, they are thirsty again, and again they forget the miracles in Egypt, forget the parting of the Red Sea, forget the earlier provision of water and forget the provision of manna food. "But the people thirsted there for water [now a second time]; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'" (Exodus 17:3).

Do you begin to see a pattern here? God is faithful over and over, and God's people have no memory. They are only aware of what is annoying them, and they complain against their leader, Moses, and against God. In the movie *Fifty First Dates*, actress Drew Barrymore plays a young woman who awakes every morning with no memory of her life up to then. The man who ultimately becomes her husband prepares a video cassette tape of her life, and every morning when she awakes, she watches the video to discover who she is and what life is about and about the one who loves her. What would her life be like if there were no video tape, no memory of the past when care was offered every day or assurance it would be provided? She would be aware every day of hunger and thirst and no expectation whatsoever of its provision. You can easily feel the fear and anxiety that would fill her spirit and the words of concern and even complaint that would fill her speech.

In the early days that the people of God spent in the wilderness, they also operated as if they had no memory of God's gracious and miraculous acts of care for them. Eventually, many of them did mature in faith. For example, much later the prophet Jeremiah was to express how down and depressed he felt but that he trusted God to come through because he remembered God's faithfulness in the past: "My soul continually thinks of it [my affliction and bitterness] and is bowed down within me. But this I

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(Lamentations 3:10-22)

call to mind, and, therefore, I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:10-22).

However, in the wilderness with Moses, the Hebrew people actually did have the capacity for memory and faith, and you would think that they would finally “get it” about God’s care, but they don’t. In those early days of their journey, God cares for His people tenderly. He knows they are like pre-school children, and their thirst and their hunger and their anxiety about the future are all they can think about, so He gives them water and manna and continues to guide them and doesn’t hold their initial grumbling against them.

However, time passes and they never learn to trust God. They just keep on complaining, refusing to acknowledge His care or trust in His love. To say it annoyed God is being polite. It came to a head when the Hebrew people finally approached the border of the Promised Land and ten of the twelve of them who were sent in to check it out reported that the land was filled with enemies and obstacles. As Moses was to say to the Israelites, <sup>26</sup>“But you were unwilling to go up. You rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; <sup>27</sup>you grumbled in your tents [that’s an interesting phrase – “you grumbled in your tents”] and said, ‘It is because the LORD hates us that he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to

the Amorites to destroy us.’” God is angry with His grumbling people because they refuse to trust the God who dearly loves them.

What does it mean to grumble? It is to mutter discontentment. It is to speak in a bit of a nasally rant-rant-rant where the tone of voice is as scathing as the topic of the complaint. To grumble is related to the word “grudge”—it is to hold something against another person. What is bickering? Two people who address their concerns to each other without humility and without respect. What is “grumbling in your tent?” It is to mutter discontentment in your home with your family or with your buddies but not with the one you are upset with. Perhaps I am irritated with my sister, but I tell you rather than speaking to her directly. Maybe I am unhappy with a decision of one of the kid’s teachers, so I tell all my friends how annoyed I am without ever talking to the teacher. Moses warns us against grumbling in our tents, grouching and complaining about stuff to our buddies and family members and not having the grace to work out things directly with the people we are upset with. That denies respect and dignity to others and denies the faithfulness of God at the same time.

And what is the New Testament’s take on grumbling? The Apostle Paul says it well: “Do all things [and remember, all means all] without grumbling or bickering; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights

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in the world, holding fast the word of life” (Philippians 2:14-16a).

Wow!

Paul is telling us that when you don't grumble in the middle of culture of complaint where grumbling is what everyone does, you shine like a star and you hold out the word of life, the word of God's grace to others. So you have a choice—a word of grace or a word of grumble. The word of grace works out differences with people and inspires faith and life. The word of grumble inspires doubt, fear, anxiety and irritation. When you don't grumble, when you address your concerns directly to the people involved in creating the situation that concerns or annoys you, and you treat them with dignity and respect, you are so out of step with the culture, you are so different that people will see Jesus in you.

To think about this in practical terms, what happens when a situation arises in home, work, community, church that you believe isn't being handled correctly? What if you speak to everyone but the individual creating the situation? That's grumbling. What if the two of you talk in a spirit of hostility and disrespect, making point and counterpoint? That's bickering. If you speak civilly directly to the person involved, that's the grace of God in you.

I was once involved in leading a major construction project for a building that ultimately would be used by hundreds of people every week. I was in a church where, instead of preaching from the

elevated pulpit, I preached from the front of the chancel. At one point, I could name fifty people who opposed the project for various reasons, yet guess how many of them had the grace to speak to me directly about it. Not one. They were all “grumbling in their tents!” At one point, an anonymous note showed up in the offering plate, “Why doesn't the pastor preach from the pulpit which is bought and paid for instead of raising money for a building that we never needed before!” It reminded me of a time when Charles Spurgeon was preaching to a large congregation during the 1800s and said, “Last week I received an anonymous note in the offering plate. All it said was, ‘Fool.’” Charles said, “Over the years I have received many notes that had a message but no signature but this is the first time I received a note that had a signature but no message!” The fact is that when the people of God complained to Moses, they did have legitimate concerns—hunger and thirst. But instead of appealing to the God who parted the Red Sea and had been caring for them all along, they speak with negative spirit, the rant-rant-rant that merely whines and whines.

Suppose you are the person to whom a concern is addressed. You receive the concern with grace, even if you don't agree with it or the concern leaves you feeling upset. You treat the person who has come to you with respect and dignity. Before the Lord, you review your actions. “Is this something I should change, Lord or should I stand firm?”

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Two of the matters that often incline us to grumble in our day are the matters of money and of leadership, both of which are front and center before us over the next couple of weeks. Tuesday we share in our national elections and next Sunday is Pledge Commitment Sunday for our congregation, and all of us will have the opportunity to offer our estimate of giving pledges of our giving for the coming year. I have discovered in talking about the biblical view on money, God's invitation for us to give proportionally of our resources, growing to and beyond the ten percent tithe and offer with a spirit of generosity, that people often react with a word of grace or a word of grumble.

Brian Bauknight tells of a college student who had an answering machine in his room. "Hi, this is Dave," went the outgoing message. "If its Mom or Dad, please send money. If it's a friend, you still owe me money. If it's the student-loan office, you didn't loan me enough money. If it's a female, leave your number and I'll call you back soon; and don't worry, I have plenty of money." In these days, even with the uncertainty that we all face in our present day economy, God gives each of us money for our own needs and use and to serve others as well and speaks to us, saying each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver [which is, of course, the exact opposite of grumbling. It is the cheerful act of

a person who knows and trusts that this financial well-being is ultimately in our loving God's hands] and God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance.

I pray that you will gracefully consider our Lord's invitation to give proportionally to that which God has given you and to give with the offering of generosity from a heart that melts with affection and affirmation for the wonderful church our Lord has given to us.

And as we approach Election Day, a helpful word to keep in mind concerning our leaders is this encouragement from Scripture. "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity" (I Timothy 2:1:1-2). It is clear from the way the Hebrew people grumbled against Moses that God took personally grumbling against His appointed leaders. Instead of complaining against them, we are called to offer a word of grace, even if we choose to communicate the cause of our concern to them.

And we pray for those who have any authority in our lives and for those who in humility are willing to stand for office. In our particular form of governance, authority passes up from those who are governed to those who govern by means of the vote—so that your use of your vote is an exercise of the God-given power to govern. I earnestly urge you to seek our Lord's guidance and vote your conscience at the polls on

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Tuesday. Then pray like crazy that our Lord will give wisdom and courage to those he would have govern us. Pray also for the well-being of and gratitude for those who were willing to sacrifice of themselves and to stand for office but were not chosen. Offer them a word of grace.