

GODLY COMPLAINING

A. Introduction: Christians are instructed to do all things without complaining or murmuring (Phil 2:14). The Greek word that is translated to complain means to mutter in discontent or dissatisfaction.

1. Recently we have been talking about how to deal with complaining as part of a larger discussion on the importance of learning to praise and thank God continually. We have more to say tonight.
 - a. We're considering what it looks like to live without complaining in real life. Does it mean we have to pretend we're happy when we aren't and say we like our circumstances when we don't? How is it possible to live without complaining when there are plenty of opportunities to be discontented?
 - b. Discontent means a yearning for improvement or perfection (*Webster's Dictionary*). We live in a world that has been damaged by sin (going all the way back to Adam) and there are all kinds of reasons to long for improvement and perfection.
 1. This world isn't the way it's supposed to be, or as God intended it to be, because of sin. There is a curse of corruption and death in the world. Life is filled with disappointment, frustration, pressure, pain, and loss. John 16:33; Matt 6:19; Rom 5:12; Gen 3:17-19; Rom 8:20; etc.
 2. But God is progressively working out His plan of redemption—His plan to deliver His creation from sin, corruption, and death. All will ultimately be made right in this world, some in this life and some in the life to come, when the world is made new. I Cor 7:31; Rom 8:18; Rev 21-22
 - c. To counteract the discontent life produces, we must learn to get our contentment from the fact that, because God is with us and for us, we have what we need to make it through this difficult life
 1. We know that the best is yet to come, in the life after this life, when every loss, pain, and injustice will be reversed, and the hopes and longings that we all have will be fulfilled.
2. Until then, we live with a dissatisfied satisfaction because we know that God will get us through until He gets us out. Jesus is our satisfaction in our circumstances, Phil 4:11-13
2. Discontent is part of life in a fallen world. And, expressing discontent is normal and natural. But we have to learn to express our discontent in a godly (or God honoring) way. How do we do this?
 - a. We must get control of our mind and our mouth. We get control of our mind with our mouth. We get control of our mouth by learning to praise and thank God continually, because you can't think and say two different things at the same time. James 3:2; Ps 34:1; I Thess 5:18; Eph 5:20
 - b. Praise, in its most basic form, is acknowledging God by talking about who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do. In every situation there is always something to thank and praise God for—the good He has done, the good He is doing, and the good He will do. Ps 107:8; 15, 21; 31
 1. This is not an emotional response. This is an action you take based on a decision you make to acknowledge God no matter what you see or how you feel.
 - A. Your praise is based on knowledge. You know from God's Word that there is more to reality than what you see and feel in the moment—God with you and for you, at work behind the scenes bringing good out of bad.
 - B. You know that there is no situation that takes Him by surprise or for which He has no solution. You know He will get you through whatever you are facing and make everything right either in this life or the life to come.
 2. Consequently, you can express your dissatisfied satisfaction through praise: This situation is really awful (expression of dissatisfaction), but it's not bigger than God (expression of praise). I don't know what to do and I'm afraid (expression of dissatisfaction), but God knows what to do and will help me (expression of praise). This looks hopeless (expression of dissatisfaction), but you, Lord, are the God of hope and nothing is impossible for you (expression of praise).

B. It is possible to express discontent without ungodly (irreverent) complaining. Expressing discontent in a

godly way comes from learning to talk about your situation in terms of what God says. Let's consider some examples of what that looks like in a fallen world.

1. David is an example of someone who expressed discontent with his circumstances in a godly way. Consider what he wrote in one of his psalms when he was being pursued by men intent on killing him.
 - a. Ps 56:1-4—The enemy troops press in on me. My foes attack me all day long. My slanderers hound me constantly, and many are boldly attacking me (v1-2, NLT). And, I am afraid.
 1. But when I'm afraid, I will trust you. I choose to trust you. I will praise your word (v3-4).
The Hebrew word translated praise means to boast. In the face of his circumstances, David chose to boast in (about) God's Word, God's promises to him.
 2. Ps 56:4—What harm could a man bring to me? With God on my side I will not be afraid of what comes. The roaring praises of God fill my heart as I trust his promises (TPT).
 - b. David didn't deny what he saw or how it made him feel. He acknowledged that there was more to his situation than what he could see and feel—God with him and for him, ready to help (v8-9).
 1. Part of learning to express discontent in a godly way involves recognizing that when we feel negative emotions, it doesn't free us from our responsibility to believe and obey God's Word.
 2. We must make the decision that we're not going to live only according to what we see and feel, even if what we feel is appropriate for what we see. We're going to base our actions on what God's Word says despite how we feel. And it's always appropriate to praise and thank God for who He is and for what He has done, is doing, and will do.
2. Paul the apostle is another example of someone who expressed discontent with his circumstances in a godly way. In II Cor 12:7-10 Paul wrote that he asked the Lord to remove a thorn in the flesh, and that God's answer to him was: My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in weakness.
 - a. Before proceeding, we must clear up some common misunderstandings of this incident. Some wrongly say that the Lord gave Paul a thorn in the flesh (possibly an eye disease) to keep him humble, and then refused to remove it (heal him). The passage says nothing like that.
 1. Paul identified the thorn as a messenger (angelic being) from Satan who was sent to harass him.
When we read about Paul's missionary journeys in the Book of Acts, we see that everywhere he went, unbelievers stirred up mobs that attacked him and or tried to drive him out of town.
 2. The devil's messenger wasn't trying to make Paul more Christlike by humbling him. He was trying to stop the gospel from advancing by disrupting Paul's ministry through wicked men.
 3. When Paul asked the Lord to remove the devil's messenger, he was asking God to do something that He has not promised to do yet—remove the devil and demons from contact with humanity and stop the trouble they cause. Paul had to learn how to deal with this reality as do we.
 - b. II Cor 12:9—God answered Paul: My grace (strength) is sufficient (enough) for you. It's what you need to deal with the chaos caused by the thorn. Your weakness is an opportunity for my power to be displayed. I can do what you can't.
 1. Paul responded: So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. Since I know it is all for Christ's good (He causes it to serve His purposes), I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong (II Cor 12:9-10. NLT).
 2. Note how Paul talked about the thorn: I don't like this; take it away (dissatisfaction). But as the Lord explained to Paul how He works through weaknesses in this fallen world, Paul's response was: I'll glory or boast in my weakness because they are opportunities for God to show Himself strong (dissatisfied satisfaction).
 - c. Consider another example from this same letter where Paul expressed a dissatisfied satisfaction with his circumstances: We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed and broken. We are perplexed, but we don't give up and quit. We are hunted down, but God never abandons us.

We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going (II Cor 4:8-9, NLT).

3. When Paul talked like this he wasn't expressing a feeling. In this same letter Paul wrote about being sorrowful, yet always rejoicing or encouraging himself. (II Cor 6:10). Paul was expressing an attitude or perspective on life.

a. The way we talk about our circumstances comes out of our view of reality (the way we see things). Paul's view of reality was shaped, first by the Old Testament, and then by what Jesus taught him (information found in the New Testament).

b. Paul knew that the Lord was at work behind the scenes in his circumstances, causing them to serve His purposes as He advances His plan of redemption. Paul recognized that the Lord would get him through whatever he faced and use it for good. This perspective enabled him to call his difficulties momentary and light. II Cor 4:17-18

1. Note that Paul got this perspective by mentally considering things he couldn't see (unseen realities). Unseen realities are revealed to us through the written Word of God.

2. There are two kinds of unseen things: those that are invisible or imperceptible to your senses (God with you and for you), and those that are yet to come (the life after this life).

A. We must develop the habit of thinking about (focusing on) unseen realities. Don't wait until you're under pressure and overwhelmed by your emotions. Make your mind think about God with you and for you as you go about your day, until it becomes normal for you.

B. This is one reason why regular Bible reading is so important. It gives you something to think about besides what you see and feel and helps you become more skilled at focusing on the Lord.

4. Consider one more example of talking about circumstances in terms of what God says—the generation of Israelites who were delivered from Egyptian slavery and arrived at the border of Canaan. Num 13-14

a. Before attempting to take the entire nation into Canaan, Moses sent twelve spies into the land to check it out. After forty days, they came back with their report. This is a land of bounty, but there are overwhelming obstacles—powerful, warlike tribes, walled cities, and unusually large people.

b. Ten of the spies determined that they should not try to enter the land, while two of them (Joshua and Caleb) said they should cross the border and take possession of the land.

1. The ten assessed the situation based on what they saw and how they felt about what they saw, without taking God into account. They said: The people in the land are stronger than us.

We felt like grasshoppers compared to them, and that's how we looked to them. Num 13:32-33

2. Their conclusions (based on sight and emotions) were wrong. The people of the land were actually afraid of Israel. They had heard how Israel's God had defeated Egypt. Joshua 2:8-11

3. This is an example of God at work, using the realities of life in a fallen world for His purposes.

Travelers and traders moving along the roads that connected Egypt with Canaan brought news of God's victory over Egypt to Canaan and frightened the people before Israel arrived.

c. Num 13:32—The ten spies gave an evil report of the land. Note that there are no curse words in their report, no dirty jokes, no gossip. In fact, they gave an accurate report about Canaan and its inhabitants, if the only information you consider is sight and reasoning, and feelings based on sight.

1. The Hebrew word that is translated evil means slander. Slander means to utter false charges or misrepresentations which defame or damage another's reputation (*Webster's Dictionary*). God said: I brought you out of Egypt to bring you into this land of plenty and provision (Ex 3:8).

To report that Canaan is a land that will destroy them is a slanderous statement about God.

2. Moses later recounted this incident and gave us an interesting detail about the evil report. He said that the spies' report discouraged the people (Deut 1:28). The Hebrew word that is translated discouraged literally means to liquefy or melt; to faint with fear, grief, or fatigue.

A. Their words had a powerful effect on the rest of the people. It stirred everyone up

emotionally. The Israelite cried all night long and expressed their discontent to Moses and Aaron—we wish we had died in Egypt or the wilderness (Num 14:1-3). Note that they were disparaging what God has already done for them—delivered them from Egyptian slavery, provided for them in the wilderness, and guided them to the land.

B. This led to accusing God of mishandling their situation and wanting harm for them—why have you brought us out here to kill us and send our wives and children off to be slaves?

5. Caleb, Joshua, and Moses assessed their situation based on the fact that God with them made them stronger than their enemies (Num 13:30; Num 14:8-9; Deut 1:29-32). But in the end, the people sided with the report based only on sight and emotion, and did not enter Canaan. Notice these key points.

a. All the spies saw the same thing. There's no reason to think that Joshua and Caleb's emotions were unaffected by the overwhelming obstacles in Canaan.

1. But they, along with Moses, acknowledged God—His past help, His presence with them, and His promise to bring them into the land. Joshua, Caleb, and Moses did not deny what the spies saw. But they talked about their situation in terms of God with them and for them.

2. Moses later said about the people: But even after all he (God) did, you refused to trust the Lord your God (Deut 1:32, NLT). Moses' words indicate that they had a choice about how to respond at the border of Canaan. They could have, should have acted differently.

A. Why would they refuse to trust God? For the same reasons many of us do. We don't feel like acknowledging God, and it seems to be a ridiculous thing to do in that moment. And we don't feel like acknowledging God.

B. Many of us make no effort to control our mind, our emotions, or our mouth, and we let them drive our actions. Then we excuse ourselves with, this is just how I feel. Don't tell me to praise and thank the Lord. You don't understand my situation.

b. There would have been nothing wrong with these people expressing the fact that the journey from Egypt to Canaan was difficult or that the obstacles in the land were formidable—and we're afraid. But this generation of Israelites engaged in ungodly complaining.

1. Ungodly complaining talks only about what it sees and feels without bringing God and His Word (His promise to help and provide) into the conversation. It often contradicts Him.

2. Ungodly complaining often directly or indirectly blames other people and/or God for its unhappiness. God is never the source of your unhappiness. And, even though people may be the cause of the challenges you face, it doesn't free you from your obligation to get control of your mind and mouth and respond in a godly way.

3. When your mind wants to go over and over the problem (fixate, obsess), get it under control with your mouth. Acknowledge God through thanksgiving and praise.

c. One more point. Note also that our words affect not only us, but other people in the situation. At the border of Canaan, the ten spies influenced and fed the tendency that Israel had (and all of us have) to be overwhelmed by sight and feelings.

1. We are supposed to encourage ourselves with God's Word, and, as Christians, our words are supposed to build people up. Maybe you are able quickly recover yourself after you explode emotionally and verbally, but what effect do you have on the people around you?

2. Eph 4:29—Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them (NLT).

C. Conclusion: We don't have to pretend that we are happy when we aren't or that nothing is wrong when all sorts of things are wrong. But we must learn to express our discontent in a godly way, without disparaging God's promises or obsessing over the problem. We can learn to live with dissatisfied satisfaction—I don't like this situation, but it won't always be this way and God will get me through until He gets me out!