

Fighting Temptation: God Fills Me with an Attitude of Gratitude!

A sermon based on Numbers 16:23-40, *“Then the LORD said to Moses, ²⁴ ‘Say to the assembly, ‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’”*

²⁵ Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶ He warned the assembly, “Move back from the tents of these wicked men! Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.” ²⁷ So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children and little ones at the entrances to their tents.

²⁸ Then Moses said, “This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: ²⁹ If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the realm of the dead, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.”

³¹ As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart ³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their possessions. ³³ They went down alive into the realm of the dead, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. ³⁴ At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, “The earth is going to swallow us too!”

³⁵ And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

³⁶ The LORD said to Moses, ³⁷ “Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to remove the censers from the charred remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy— ³⁸ the censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the LORD and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites.”

³⁹ So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned to death, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, ⁴⁰ as the LORD directed him through Moses. This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and his followers.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"I don't want to eat the spaghetti! I want peanut butter and jelly!" "I don't want to watch that movie! I want to watch Paw Patrol instead." "I don't want to go to bed! I want to play out here for a few more minutes!"

Parents, I know you know the struggle. Every child, at some point has this stubborn streak, where it seems like they're constantly being contentious, always arguing, complaining about something you asked them to do, grumbling because they don't want that, and you have these moments where you want to tear your hair out or go into the car, lock the doors and just let out a good scream, or even just crawl into bed, call it quits, and, exasperated, say to your spouse, "It's your turn. You deal with it."

You've been there (I'm guessing) because that's an unfortunate consequence of sin...grumbling, complaining when children don't get their way.

You know, maybe it's no accident how we sometimes call the Israelites "the children of Israel." I mean, if you follow their history, especially their time between Egypt and finally making it into the Promised Land, it seems the people's favorite pastime was to act just like entitled children and grumble and complain. Like, they finally got out from underneath the oppressive rule of Pharaoh, Pharaoh changed his mind, backed the Israelites up against the Red Sea...they complained about how life was better serving the Egyptians. Further down the road, a number of times they got hungry or thirsty or sick of eating just manna, and they grumbled and complained about how they were fed so much better in Egypt. You'd think it was enough to drive Moses insane.

Well here, today, we have another case of the complaints. What our verses from Numbers focus on is how God dealt with the grumbling; the verses surrounding that give us some context as to why he needed to act in that manner.

The quick synopsis is...a group of three men – Korah (who was a Levite), Dathan, and Abiram – became unhappy and discontent with how Moses and Aaron seemed to be wielding all the power. Their complaint was, ***"Why do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly (over all the Israelites)?" (Numbers 16:3).*** They wanted to be in charge. Sounds a little – or a lot - like the lobbying and campaigning we often see in politics today...complain about the one in charge.

There's one thing they forgot, though. Moses and Aaron were in their positions because God put them there. And God didn't care for the grumbling one bit. Look at how he dealt with those three men and their supporters. The next day, Moses called all the Israelites together, said, "These men will die. If they die a natural death, then God hasn't chosen me. If God does something totally new and unusual, like, I don't know, just spit-balling here, maybe open the earth up and have it swallow them whole and then send fire from heaven to consumer all their co-conspirators...if that happens, then those men have angered God, the God who has chosen me to be your leader."

And sure enough, that's what happened. The earth opened up, swallowed the three men and their families whole, God sent fire from the sky to destroy their followers...which, understand, wasn't just God's way of proving Moses was his chosen leader...this was God's swift and brutal punishment for complaints – which weren't really against Moses, but against God. Makes you and me look rather benevolent when all we do is send the kids to timeout or their rooms when they gripe and complain, doesn't it.

But if you think it's just kids – or maybe also just the children of Israel - who were apt to complain and grumble....maybe it's time to think again and think a little harder.

One that comes to mind is just this past week, it was getting late, and Becky asked me if I wanted to watch a video for this online class we're doing for our adoption, and I don't remember if I said anything or not (I'm guessing I did), but I know the audible sigh and massive eye roll said enough. I didn't want to do it then. And I'm embarrassed to tell you that.

But I know I'm not alone. Maybe for you, it was at work, and your boss asked you to help out with this project – adding a little more to your plate – and they walked away and you said, either to yourself or a co-worker, "Don't they know how busy I am? If they want it done, why don't they do it themselves."

Or, at home, your spouse asks you to help out with some task, and your response is, "Well, it's right in the middle of my show, or I'm reading the paper right now; you do it." Have you been there?

Or, one of our favorites, the government passes some new law or regulation – or is at least in the talks – and it's not inherently wrong but it's not to our liking; we get together with the buddies, and it seems all we can do is gripe and complain about how terrible they are and how they're ruining this country. I know I'm not the only one guilty here.

Have you ever looked at your job, your car, your house, your health, your bank account, your relationships, and said, "I'm not happy with this. I wish I had *this* better."?

And it's not just our personal lives, either. I asked you, on behalf of the Council, a few weeks ago to sign up for this every member Bible study that we'd like everyone to do. Be honest, was your initial reaction, "I don't really want to do that. I don't have time to do that. I don't think I need that." Was any of that you?

Or, maybe going further, when Pastor preaches on something in his sermon that's directly applicable to you, maybe even confronting you with something you're guilty of, are you the person who accepts the criticism with open ears and a repentant heart, or are you more like me, quick to get offended, like, "Why is Pastor always picking on me or harping on this sin?"

Gripping, complaining, grumbling...we're all guilty. But is that really such a big deal? Am I just making a mountain out of a molehill here? Everyone does it; everyone complains.

But what does the grumbling...what are those complaints really saying? "God, I'm not satisfied with what you've given me. God, I'm not pleased with what you tell me. God, I'm not content with what your expectations are for me." And so we grumble. We grumble against God. We grumble against God's called workers. We grumble against God's public servants.

And God certainly thinks it's a big deal. He treats it as a big deal. Look again how he dealt with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Pretty severely. And, I know it's not part of our verses today, but in the very next verse of Numbers 16 (verse 41), the next day the Israelites grumbled against Moses again, "**You have killed the LORD's people**" (**Numbers 16:41**). And you know what God did? To these people who did not learn their lesson, he sent a plague that killed almost 15,000 Israelites, stopped only because Moses and Aaron stepped in and make sacrifice for those people and their grumbling. So, again, is this a big deal?

But Pastor, what about this? I know I hem and I haw, but I eventually do it. Like, for all my complaining at home, I'll eventually take out the trash. I may not always be eager to be at church on Sundays, having to sacrifice those extra, precious hours of sleep; I may have to drag myself out of bed and sulk my way into church, but I'm here. I may not be super excited about helping out at this church event or serving on the Council or cleaning the church – my response is usually, "Well, if no one else will do it" – but then I still do it. That's better, right?

How about I leave you with this...verse 9, what Moses, speaking on behalf of God, said to those three men who were complaining against Moses and really against God, ***"Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the LORD's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them?"***

Remember who the complaining is really against...God, who has stopped at nothing to gift you far beyond what you have ever earned or deserved. And our response, too many times, is, "God, I don't want to. God, I'm not satisfied. I'm not happy...with you."

Would that the LORD bring about something new totally new with us in our grumbling and complaining and discontent...the whole earth swallow us up, or rain down the fire of his judgment on us...or even just sending us to the place of eternal separation from him.

But God's response? He does bring about something totally new and unexpected. He doesn't treat us as we deserve. He treats us with grace as he treated Jesus as we deserve.

Right, can you think of how? If you think some of the tasks God has given you – or even this life God has called you to – is so hard and difficult – maybe even at times unfair – look at Jesus. Even from early on, Jesus knew...his lot in life was to live the toughest kind of life – the perfect life – for you and then to suffer violently and unjustly at the hands of God's enemies and then ultimately die the most excruciating death, being nailed to the cross while bearing the sins and those sins' punishment for every other person who ever lived, who's living, who will live. Talk about unfair.

And yet, his attitude? Look at the hymn we'll be singing in a little bit. The title gives it away, "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth." But listen to some of the lyrics, ***"A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, our guilt and evil bearing and, laden with the sins of earth, none else the burden sharing. Goes patient on, grows weak and faint, to slaughter led without complaint, that spotless life to offer, bears shame and stripes and wounds and death, anguish and mockery and says, "Willing all this I suffer."***

Even when God's plan was to have his eternal judgment swallow Jesus up on the cross in death, like the ground swallowed Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, Jesus' attitude was, ***"Yes, Father, yes, most willingly I'll bear what you command me. My will conforms to your decree; I'll do what you have asked me."***

It was a totally new kind of love – unconditional, selfless, self-sacrificing, totally committed to saving you...a love shown through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection...all of that done willingly and without complaint. And all our complaints, all our grumbling, all our moments of malcontent and dissatisfaction have been paid for. Again, is that really such a big deal? Yeah, so much so that God sent Jesus to live and die and rise so all that would be erased from our lives and erased before God for now and for eternity.

Jesus lived and died and rose so that now you and I are empowered to live our lives without complaint, as the hymn says, **“From morn till eve, in all I do, I'll praise you, Christ, my treasure. To sacrifice myself for you shall be my aim and pleasure. My stream of life shall ever be a current flowing ceaselessly, your constant praise outpouring. I'll treasure in my memory, O Lord, all you have done for me, your gracious love adoring.”**

That is a life where Jesus has taken those complaints and the grumbling away and replaced it with an attitude of gratitude. Have you ever used that on your kids? When they're being grumpy or argumentative or complaining, you say, “Let's change that to an attitude of gratitude.”

How can that change occur in me? How can that change occur in you? In this life, how can we respond to the challenges, to the hardships, to the unfavorable situations with an attitude of gratitude? How can we continue to fight the temptation to grumble and complain? Do what the hymn says. Treasure in your memory all Jesus has done for you, the totally new love God showed to you through Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection.

Because what he has done fills us with thankfulness. It fills us with contentment. It fills us with the peace that surpasses our understanding...peace that will last until and into eternity. Amen.

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