

LESSONS LEARNED IN THE WILDERNESS

Week 5: Grumbling vs Gratitude

Main Idea of Series: The wilderness isn't a waste when it leads to deeper faith in God and a bigger view of God.

Week 1: God's Power to Part the Waters (Exodus 13-14; the Red Sea crossing)

Week 2: God's Provision and Daily Grace to Battle Worry (Exodus 16; the daily manna)

Week 3: God's Life-Giving Oasis versus the Mirage of Idols (Exodus 32; the golden calf)

Week 4: David's Positive Example versus Israel's Negative Example (Psalm 63; thirsty in the desert)

Week 5: Israel's Grumbling vs David's Gratitude (Num. 11; Ps. 57; 95; complaints and murmuring)

"Do all things without grumbling" (Philippians 2:14)

"Give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

"Then they [Israel in the wilderness] despised the pleasant land; they did not believe his promise. ²⁵They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the Lord." (Ps. 106:24-25)

Israel's Grumbling in the Wilderness

Examples of Israel grumbling in the wilderness: Ex. 14:10-12; 15:22-27; 16:2, 7; 17:3; Num. 11-14; 16:41; 21:4-6; 14:1-4; 20:2-9; 21:4-6; Dt. 1:27. See also historical references such as Psalm 95 and 106:24-26.

Numbers 11

1) Grumbling about what God has withheld, not provided, or not done (Numbers 11:1-3)

For other examples, see Ex. 15:22-27; 16; 17:1-7; Num. 11:1-3; Gen. 3; 1 Sam. 8.

- Grumbling can come from the belief God has withheld something we need to flourish or be happy.
- This is the original temptation and whisper of Satan in the Garden of Eden. There is something you don't have that God hasn't given you, but it can make your life better or fulfill you.
- Grumbling says something about what we're thinking about or believing about God, such as he isn't providing for us, doesn't know what we need, isn't wise in our life, doesn't have good plans or purposes for us, has abandoned us, is holding good things back from us, or doesn't love us.
- Grumbling is woven into discontentment, ingratitude, and idolatry.

2) Grumbling about what God *has* provided or done for us.

For other examples, see Num. 11:4-15; 14:1-2; Ex. 15:22-27.

- Grumbling can come from the belief what God has done, given, or planned for us isn't what's best or what we want.
- Israel is tired of manna (God's gracious provision) and wants melons and meat.
- This complaint acts as if God has made a mistake, is a bad giver, or should have chosen another option. It also believes similar to point (1) about what we think of God as being unwise, unloving, or having bad purposes for us.
- Grumbling assumes we know more than God or better than God about what's best for us.

Fighting Grumbling

- Fight false thoughts with truths. God is wise, has good plans, knows what's best for us, loves us, and gives only good things. He is at work and is present.
See Psalm 84:11; 34:10; 16:11; Rom. 8:28-29, 32; Matthew 7:9-11; 6:28-34.
- Trust God rather than resist God. Wait on him and cultivate contentment rather than sowing seeds of discontentment, ingratitude, and idolatry that want things other than what God has for us.
- Bring your complaints and cries to God in prayer requests and lament rather than complaining about God through grumbling. Talking to God builds and exhibits trust, but grumbling about God without bringing our desires, concerns, and feelings exhibits a lack of trust.
- If God has good plans for me (Ps. 16:11) and is at work, seek to learn what he's teaching you. Draw near rather than drifting. Receive his plan rather than resisting it. Learn from him and learn about him through the wilderness.
- Both grumbling and gratitude are contagious, so be careful what you're spreading.
- Remember God's faithfulness in past trials. You've no doubt faced many scenarios that felt too big, like they would crush, or that would last forever. Look back on God's past work to find faith for the future.
- Look out for God's provision and listen to what God is teaching you more than you focus on the things you don't like.
- Humble yourself before God (Phil. 2:1-15; 4:6-7). Sometimes grumbling comes from things like entitlement, pride, or believing we deserve certain things. Humility submits to God's good plan, confesses we are not entitled to or deserving of anything, and is grateful for God's mercy and grace.

David and Gratitude

One thing you notice in the Psalms is how pervasive thanksgiving is. David walks through suffering and the wilderness, and yet he doesn't see trials as opposed to thanksgiving. He can lament hard circumstances in one sentence and give thanks in the next because he trusts God, or he remembers God's faithfulness in similar situations in the past, or because he anticipates with confidence how God will deliver him this time.

Examples of David's Wilderness Thanksgiving: Ps. 52:9; 54:6; 56:12; 57:7-10; 59:16-17; 63:3-5.

Psalm 57

- 57:1—David goes to God for mercy and help, and he runs to God as his refuge. He hides in God as the storm passes by.
- 57:2—He cries out to God for his needs—rather than complaining about God—and trusts God will fulfill his good purposes. He talks to God in prayer, entrusting his concerns to God, instead of grumbling about God but not going to him.
- 57:3-6—David intermingles prayer for areas of fear or worry next to confidence God is and will work on his behalf. In verse 3 he asks for deliverance and in verse 4 mentions the enemies out to get him.
- 57:7-11—David speaks truth to his heart and declares he will remain steadfast through the wilderness. He will continue to sing praise and give thanks. He seeks God's glory through this more than his own.

"I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. ¹⁰For your steadfast love is great to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds." (Ps. 57:9-10)

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:6-7)

David gives thanks for:

- How God delivered, protected, and provided in the past, trusting in him to be the same today.
- God is as a God full of compassion, power, mercy, faithfulness, and love.
- For God hearing his cry or he gives thanks knowing his prayer has been heard.
- David gives thanks connected to his prayer request, in an expectation for how God will act. He gives thanks in advance for what God is doing and what God will do.

David anchors his soul in trust through thanksgiving rather than fueling ingratitude, idolatry, or discontentment through grumbling. He listens to the truth rather than listening to whispers and lies. He seeks to rest with contentment in what God is doing rather than stew in discontentment about what he thinks God should do.

David is a great model in the wilderness of how to continue to trust God and seek God by choosing to give thanks instead of grumbling. And what happens is that as David sets his eyes on God through gratitude, his faith grows. Thanksgiving anchors his heart in who God is, what God has done, how God is working, and what God promises to do. The wilderness threatens to steal our attention with scary and harsh circumstances, but rather than only looking around, David looks up. And it's because of this that David will later leave the wilderness with a stronger faith in God. He walks out of the wilderness with a heart of thankfulness and a list of ways he saw God at work. The wilderness isn't a waste for David because it leads to seeing God more clearly and knowing God in deeper ways, but this happens in part because he chooses gratitude to God instead of grumbling against God.

Practical Ideas to Give Thanks Rather than Grumble

1. Keep a journal (print or digital) for an ongoing list of reasons to give thanks. Or to make it more public with roommates or your family, create a space for recording reasons to give thanks, whether it's a poster-board with post-it notes or just written praises, a thanksgiving chain, a thanksgiving tree, a thanksgiving jar where you right down reasons to give thanks on a slip of paper and toss it into jar to read later when you need encouragement, or some other idea. This helps you not only practice thanksgiving but to keep reasons for gratitude in front of you. You can find many good ideas online for incorporating thanksgiving into a craft or project—such as a Thanksgiving tree—to make it fun and memorable.
2. Build gratitude into your prayer life by including thanking God at the beginning of your prayers.
3. Testify to God's goodness by sharing with one person a day something God has done you're thankful for. When eating with friends or family, ask everyone to share one thing they're thankful for.
4. Help children in your life develop gratitude to God by giving thanks. Ask them about good things in their life and who they come from. Help them trace things to God.
5. Find songs or written prayers of thanksgiving and sing or read through them.
6. Pick one attribute of God to study for a month. Find Bible verses related to that attribute. Read them and then give thanks to God for who He is.
7. The ABC's of thanksgiving. Cultivate gratitude by going through A to Z of the alphabet and consider God's blessings or things you can give thanks for, whether they're things in front of you, truths about God, or blessings or provision he's given you.

8. Walk around whatever room or space you're in—or go outside—and pray with thanksgiving for all the things you see or the memories it stirs and how they point you to God's goodness, faithfulness, love, generosity, providence, or provision.
9. As your mind starts to drift to worry, fear, or anxiety, use thanksgiving as one way to combat it. You might pray with thanksgiving back to God or recount blessings in your life or God's goodness and grace throughout your history. But redirect your thinking off of fear and onto gratitude. Don't look around in worry but look up in gratitude.
10. Write other people thank you notes. Telling other people "thank you" helps us practice gratitude and learn to notice reasons to give thanks, and as we tell specific people "thank you" it stirs our gratitude to God for them. In his letters, Paul's thanksgiving often directly relates to people God put in his life or their ministries he rejoices in.

For Further Study

- **Additional Verses on Grumbling:** Ps. 106:24-26; Phil. 2:14; James 5:9; 1 Cor. 10:10; 1 Peter 4:9; Jude 1:16; John 6:41, 61; Mal. 2:17.
- **Discontentment:** Ex. 16:8; Ps. 106:25; Num. 11:1-4; Eccl. 5:10; Luke 12:15; Heb. 13:15.
- "[A Prayer for a non-grumbling grace-fueled heart](#)" by Scotty Smith at thegospelcoalition.org
- *Chasing Contentment* by Erik Raymond; *Wilderness Wanderings: Finding Contentment in the Desert Times of Life* by Stacy Reaoch.