

EXPLAINING THE DIFFERENTIALS
RITICAL LORD, DOUBTING REBELLO
SELF-CENTERED CHANGE RESISTAN
FAITHLESS MY STUBBORN ENVIOUS
INGRATEFUL ATTITUDE UNCRACIOU
HABITUAL GRUMBLING UNCHECKED
LAMENTING BITTER SINFUL JUDGMENT
PRIDEFUL CHEERLESS MATERIALISTI
GATIVE BEFORE CONDEMNING ANGE
FACTIOUS CYNICAL IT'S TOO LATE

JAMES MACDONALD

WITH BARB PEIL

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



James MacDonald has committed his life to the unapologetic proclamation of God's Word. He is the founder and senior pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel, one of the fastest-growing churches in the Chicago area, reaching more than 13,000 lives each weekend. Heard on the "Walk in the Word" radio and television broadcasts, his practical teaching is also accessed by thousands online. Through James's leadership and by God's grace, Harvest Bible Fellowship, the church-planting ministry he founded in 2002, has planted more than one hundred churches across North America and around the world.

Born in London, Ontario, Canada, James received his master's degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and his doctorate from Phoenix Seminary. He and his wife, Kathy, have three adult children and reside in Chicago. For more information about James and these ministries, visit harvestbible.org or walkintheword.org.

Other books and Bible studies by James MacDonald:

Always True: God's Promises When Life Is Hard Bible study (LifeWay, 2011)
Always True: God's Five Promises for When Life Is Hard (Moody, 2011)
Authentic Bible study (LifeWay, 2013)
Authentic (Moody, 2013)
Come Home Bible study (LifeWay, 2014)
Come Home (Moody, 2013)
Downpour: He Will Come to Us like the Rain Bible study (LifeWay, 2006)
Downpour: He Will Come to Us like the Rain (B&H, 2006)
God Wrote a Book (Crossway, 2002)
Gripped by the Greatness of God Bible study (LifeWay, 2005)

Gripped by the Greatness of God (Moody, 2005)
I Really Want to Change ... So, Help Me God (Moody, 2000)
Lord, Change Me (Moody, 2012)
Lord, Change My Attitude ... Before It's Too Late (Moody, 2001)
10 Choices: A Proven Plan to Change Your Life Forever (Thomas Nelson, 2008)
When Life Is Hard Bible study (LifeWay, 2010)
When Life Is Hard (Moody, 2010)
Vertical Church Bible study (LifeWay, 2012)
Vertical Church (David C Cook, 2012)

Visit lifeway.com/jamesmacdonald for information about James MacDonald resources published by LifeWay.

Barb Peil is the communications director for James MacDonald's radio ministry "Walk in the Word."

Week 1

REPLACE A COMPLAINING ATTITUDE ...

SESSION 1

CONNECT

When you get out of bed in the morning, what's your attitude? Is it a good indicator of your attitude for the day? Of your outlook on life? Find one or two more people in your group with a morning attitude like yours. Commit to pray for one another throughout this study.

START

Ask the following questions of the entire group.

1. Turn to the contents page. You'll see five negative attitudes and five positive attitudes that outline this 10-week study. Which one negative attitude and one positive attitude do you most want to (or need to) study? Why?
2. Do you think most people are aware of their attitudes or think about them often? How do you think people develop positive or negative attitudes?
3. Do you think it's easy or difficult to change an attitude?

WATCH

The focus of murmuring is on the meaningless words that flow from my lips that reflect the _____ that's in my heart.

Those who choose murmuring as a lifestyle will spend their lifetime in the _____.

We _____ our attitudes.

Attitudes are _____ of thinking.

Attitudes are _____ of thinking formed over a long period of _____.

Complaining is _____.

The word *sin* means missing the mark, failing in regard to God's holy _____ and just _____.

Complaining is to express _____ with a circumstance that is not wrong and I am doing nothing myself to _____.

God makes no distinction between your words and your thoughts. They are equally _____ to Him.

God _____ our complaining.

We have to focus the teaching on complaining to the exact subject matter that's being _____.

Video sessions available for purchase at
lifeway.com/changemyattitude

REPLACE A COMPLAINING ATTITUDE ...

God is displeased when you complain about your _____ in life—the circumstances that are unique to you.

Whatever God has allowed, that's the thing He wants to grow your _____ through.

God _____ **our complaining.**

God _____ **our complaining.**

Am I a _____?

Am I reaping the _____ of complaining in my relationship with God?

Am I willing to _____?

DISCUSS

1. How did James MacDonald define *attitude*? Why is it important to realize that we choose our attitudes?
2. Complaining is a good place to start this study because we all complain. What do you complain about most often? Why is it so easy to complain? What does complaining reveal about our hearts?
3. Why is it important to understand that God hears, hates, and judges our complaining? Why does He respond in those ways? Which response did you most need to hear today?
4. The wilderness will be a common theme throughout this study. How would you summarize what James said about the wilderness?
5. What did you learn from the biblical examples used in the video teaching? How can you apply those lessons to your life today?
6. Have you ever considered complaining to be sinful? How does that change your perspective? What complaining attitude can you repent of?
7. What will you do to guard yourself from complaining this week? Whenever you catch yourself being tempted to complain, deliberately choose to stop yourself and ask the Lord to change your attitude.

PREPARE

After each week's group session you'll complete five days of personal study that will help you apply biblical truths about the attitude. Group sessions 2–10 will begin with a brief time of discussion to review ways the Lord has worked in your life during the week. Come prepared to interact with your partner(s) and with the group each week.

STOP YOUR GRUMBLING!

Memory Verse

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

Philippians 2:14-15

If you've ever traveled the landscape of the Old Testament, you know it's not all sunny walks in meadows of God's grace. In fact, there are some pretty dark places I would call deep valleys of mystery where we ask, "God, what are You doing?" We believe all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, so we embrace the entire message of God's Word. The passage we're going to study this week has mystery, but we embrace it as God's revelation of Himself to us.

This week we're going to travel to a day when God revealed His heart in an action so radical that it staggers the mind. Think back to when God rescued His people from Egypt. He raised up a man named Moses to lead them out. Then He parted the Red Sea in a phenomenal act of grace and protection. God assured His people, "I'm going to be a personal God to you. I'm going to lead you to a land flowing with milk and honey. I'm going to bless you, take care of you, and provide for you. It's not going to be easy along the way, but I'm going to be with you." And God delivered on that awesome promise day after day.

You'd think the people would have been amazed. They'd been rescued, protected, miraculously fed, clothed, and assured of God's presence by a cloud by day and by a pillar of fire at night. You'd think the topic around the campfire every night would have been the awesome things God did that day or at least that they would have said thanks in their evening prayers.

Instead, the Israelites griped about what they had left behind in Egypt. They fussed about the miracle bread God provided daily. They whined about their future. The complaining escalated to the point that when they reached the edge of the promised land, God said, "Enough!" He was so fed up with their rotten attitudes that He said to Moses, "I'm going to kill them all and start over a new nation with you!" But Moses said, "Lord, don't do that. How would that reflect on You?" So God relented: "All right then. They're going back into the wilderness, and they're going to stay in the wilderness until every one of them over 20 years old dies. Then I'll give their kids what they wouldn't let Me give to them."

God sent a message: "For every day you shall bear your guilt a year, even forty years" (Num. 14:34, NASB). Forty years for the 40 days of their faithless, grumbling, complaining attitude. God was serious about His people's complaining attitude!

In spite of all God did for them, the people responded by complaining. The Bible repeatedly refers to their complaining—in the Psalms, in the Prophets, in the Gospels, in the Epistles, and three separate times in the Book of Hebrews. The men who wrote Scripture were always thinking about the way

God regards grumbling. He hates a doubtful, complaining, rebellious attitude, and He simply won't tolerate it.

If we choose complaining as our lifestyle, we can be absolutely sure we'll be sent to live in the wilderness. The goal of this week's study is to open our hearts to God as He shows us our complaining attitude and to invite Him to change us. Let's find out how to stay out of the desert.

I laugh when I think of a wonderful woman in our church who tells this complainer's story. She had made a new meatloaf recipe for her family's dinner. From the moment she set the dish on the table, they had nothing good to say about it. What's this? Ooh, it smells funny. What are those things on the top? Why didn't you make it the old way? Do I have to eat it? Having reached her limit, she picked up the meatloaf without a word, opened the patio door, and chucked the meatloaf—dish and all—over the back fence. She now fears this will be the story that is told at her funeral, the day Mom launched the meatloaf into space.

Have you ever felt like the mom in this true story? What would you have done in this situation? What would you have wanted to do?

In the short term complaining separates us from God; in the long term it becomes a lifestyle that sends us to the wilderness.

What Do You Think About Complaining?

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 1. Complaining drains your energy and affects your outlook on life. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 2. Complaining moves you forward in decisive decision making. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 3. It's easier to complain than to decide what to do and then do it. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 4. Complaining is a good way to let your dissatisfaction be heard. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 5. Complaining feels good. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 6. Complaining is a way to avoid taking action. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 7. Sometimes a situation merits complaints. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 8. Complaining keeps you from doing anything positive. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 9. I complain only to help someone understand my perspective. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 10. I complain more when I feel _____. |
| ☐ Agree | ☐ Disagree | 11. I complain less when I feel _____. |

According to the definition of *complaining* in the margin, indicate whether the following actions should be considered complaining. Explain why or why not.

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| ☐ Yes | ☐ No | 1. Asking your small-group leader if the group can consistently dismiss on time since your babysitter needs to be home by a designated hour |
| ☐ Yes | ☐ No | 2. Asking your spouse what he or she does all day, why the house isn't picked up, or why the chores didn't get done over the weekend |
| ☐ Yes | ☐ No | 3. Sulking because you don't like the way your friend is behaving, but when your friend asks you what is wrong, you respond with "Nothing" |
| ☐ Yes | ☐ No | 4. Asking the waiter to cook your steak a little more because it's rare and you asked for well done |
| ☐ Yes | ☐ No | 5. Telling your friends and family that you hate a particular restaurant because it never cooks the food the way you like it |

Complaining
Expressing dissatisfaction with a circumstance that isn't wrong and I'm doing nothing to correct

Is Complaining a Sin?

The word sin means *missing the mark, failing in regard to God's holy standard and just demands*. Is complaining a sin? You may respond, "I don't think so. Complaining may not be a great thing, but a sin? Stealing and lying and blasphemy—sure, they're sins, but complaining? I mean, whom am I hurting when I complain?"

Good question. Let's look more closely at the toxic fallout from complaining.

You hurt yourself. When you focus on things that bring you down, you nurture a negative perspective on life. This isn't just a violation of the Positive Thinkers Club rules; this is a warning. Remember, when God says, "Don't," He means, "Don't hurt yourself."

Read Philippians 4:8. Instead of complaining, what does God say to think about?

You hurt God. God hears your complaining and your wrong attitudes, and it drives Him crazy. Why? Because a grumbler doubts God's character and denies that He's at work. When you complain, you're denying that God can and will be in control of the situation.

What have you complained about that now, on closer evaluation, you see that your lack of faith was the real reason for your negative attitude?

You hurt the people around you. Like breathing out toxic air, your griping poisons the people around you. Few people keep their complaints to themselves. When you stir things up, you raise new and negative thoughts in the minds of everyone within earshot. They might be working hard to keep a good perspective, and there you go, dumping your cesspool on their territory. We've all been victims of this crime. Recall a time when someone else's attitude poisoned yours. What was the issue? How did your thinking change? If you need help remembering a situation, focus your memory on conversations with people from church. This is Satan's primary target. Get the people murmuring about the music or the carpet color or the pastor's wife, and they won't hear what they desperately need to hear from God's Word.

How have you or can you overcome this destructive attitude pattern? How can you keep it from spreading?

Ask any parent, teacher, small-group leader, or pastor what kind of effect complaining has on the church. What do you think is the primary result when people fuss, whine, and complain?

The leader feels ...

The mission is ...

The group responds by ...

Who wins?

No doubt about it, complaining is a sin. By complaining about your difficult circumstance, you're forfeiting the grace that could help you through it. All the grace and strength you need to experience joy and victory are available to you, but by choosing to complain, by clinging to the idol of a perfect life, you're flushing away the grace of God.

Lord, help me recognize complaining when I hear it. Soften my heart to realize what this complaining means to You and to others. Protect me from being poisoned by others' words and by my own attitude. Lord, change my attitude toward complaining. Help me do it less, love it less, and tolerate it less. Forgive me for forgetting Your faithfulness to me. You've given me _____. Stir faith in me to trust You in good times and bad. Thank You for the ways You're at work in my heart. Amen.

Back in the Desert

Read the following Scriptures, which describe instances when the people of Israel complained in the wilderness, and complete the chart.

	THE CIRCUMSTANCE	WHAT THE PEOPLE DID	HOW GOD RESPONDED
Exodus 14:10-15			
Exodus 15:22-25			
Exodus 16:1-7			
Exodus 17:1-6			
Numbers 11:1			

We'll visit the meandering murmurers again tomorrow. For now consider what God is showing you about complaining. Talk to Him now, asking Him to reveal any new insights about a complaining attitude and what you can do about it.

WEEK 1 FROM ONE KIND OF DAY 2 SLAVERY TO ANOTHER

Core Passages for Today's Study

Exodus 14
Numbers 11:1
Psalm 106

The atmosphere was dry and hot, even scorching. But the heat wasn't coming from the direction of the wind; it was radiating from inside the campground, in the doorways of the tents—which is like saying, “Over the back fence”—of the children of Israel. Wilderness attitudes were stirring in the homes of the people who longingly looked in their rearview mirrors at the “good times” they had left behind them in Egypt when they were mistreated as slaves.

The complaining over oppression and bondage that had begun back in Egypt had become convenient carry-on baggage on their flight to freedom. Grumbling had become a way of life. But how could anybody justify complaining in light of the blessings that had been theirs thus far? Could anyone before or since say they've seen God's hand on them with more tangible care and protection? For generations in Egypt, they had lived in the manacles of slavery. Daily they endured the lash on their backs and the paranoid contempt of their Egyptian taskmasters driving them to build another edifice along the Nile. Generations turned under the shadow of suffering at the hands of people who hated them personally and as a race.

Then God raised up Moses. After the ultimate showdown of 10 miraculous plagues that devastated the Egyptians but didn't hurt the Israelites one bit, Pharaoh gave them a Get Out of Slavery Free card and welcomed their exodus as every Egyptian home, beginning with his, mourned the sudden, tragic deaths of their firstborn sons. But then Pharaoh, coming to his senses when he called for his dinner and realized his slaves had all left the palace, along with his country's entire workforce, rallied his military and raced in hot pursuit of God's people.

How did the newly freed slaves respond? Had the plagues confirmed for them that God could and would take care of them? No. When there appeared to be no escape at the Red Sea, they complained rather than trusting and waiting for God to act (see Ex. 14:11-12). Complaining was not only their default; it was also what kept them slaves, only now to another master.

Sarcasm and Complaining

In Exodus 14:11 the grumblers sarcastically asked Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” How have you used or heard sarcasm used in complaining? Was it effective? Is sarcasm a good vehicle to express dissatisfaction? Why or why not?

Read Exodus 14:11-14. Whom did the complainers turn on?

What did they say? Describe their tone of voice as you imagine it to be.

What was their attitude prior to the exodus?

*Complaining kept
the children of
Israel in bondage.*

Does the Israelites' response surprise you? Why or why not?

Describe Moses' encouragement to the complainers.

What was Moses' wise admonition about what they should do when the Lord fights for them?

What does other Scripture say about slaves-turned-freemen? Turn to Psalm 106. This historical psalm reveals what was really going on during Israel's wilderness wanderings.

According to Psalm 106:7-12, when cornered by their enemy in that desert cul-de-sac, fearful and unable to escape, what had the Israelites forgotten about God?

According to verse 8, why did God save them?

According to verse 12, what choice did the Israelites make that combated their fear?

True praise affirms God's character. It's more than just positive words; it's a powerful force in battling wilderness attitudes.

Exodus 14:21-22 says God divided the Red Sea and made a way for the Israelites to walk on dry ground "as through a desert" (Ps. 106:9). He led them safely across on dry land. Once on the safe side, they turned and watched that same Red Sea swallow up all their enemies (see Ex. 14:26-28).

How did the people respond?

Read Exodus 15:1-7. Was the Israelites' song true praise? Explain your answer.

While Miriam's tune of Exodus 15:21 still echoed in their heads, not three verses later the people were at it again—complaining, grumbling, forgetful of yesterday's miracles. They were hot, blinded by desert glare, weary, and now thirsty. Exodus 15:24 says, "The people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' "

Read Exodus 15:21-26. If you could be transported back in time to walk among the people on the evening they camped at Marah, what would you say to the grumblers?

Imagine how they likely would have responded.

Numbers 11:1 says:

The people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.

NUMBERS 11:1

Why was the Lord angry when He heard the people complain?

Speaking God's Language

What loving provision has God made for His people, as attested in the following verses?

Psalm 103:2-5

Psalm 116:2

John 14:2-3

2 Corinthians 12:9

Hebrews 13:5

Psalm 106:13-15 continues to describe the events of Numbers 11:4-34.
How did Israel's actions test God?

What was the trade-off for getting what they complained about?

Why is it a risk to demand anything from God?

Just when you think Israel couldn't get any more ungrateful, Psalm 106:19-22 paints an even darker picture. While Moses was away from camp, the Israelites crossed the line. In a matter of weeks, what had started as fearful grumbling at the Red Sea now escalated. Unchecked complaining took them to a new low.

In the following verses from Psalm 106, list the fruit of the Israelites' complaining.

Verse 20

Verses 21-22

Verse 24

Verse 25

Read Matthew 12:36-37. What warning did Jesus give?

What would be different in your manner of conversation if you truly believed Jesus' warning?

God Is Faithful Even When We Aren't

God never forgot His promise to Israel. He saw their needs. He heard their cries. He relented from His anger because of His faithful love. But the Israelites wasted their years wandering in a desert. They could have been enjoying a land promised to them that flowed with milk and honey. They could have been living in cities they didn't build and in houses they didn't furnish, been drinking water from wells they hadn't dug, and eating fresh fruit from the vine and from orchards they didn't plant. They could have been enjoying blessing after blessing. Instead, they chose to complain about what they had given up back in the land of slavery. They chose to live in a wilderness. Like sand through an hourglass, their time to repent, obey, and turn to the Lord was up. God said, "Enough. You want to nurture your wilderness attitude of complaining? Then live in the wilderness the rest of your days."

Psalm 106 records things we do or fail to do that promote a wilderness attitude. Record at least five here with the verse reference.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

What have you learned about God's character from Psalm 106? Describe at least three of God's character traits found in this psalm and note the verses.

1.

2.

3.

What promise of God are you forfeiting when you choose to complain?

When your murmuring goes unchecked and unrepented of, what blessings do you give up?

Is it worth it? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Start a list today to keep for the rest of this week of situations when you complain, hear complaining, or are tempted to complain. Record what you were dissatisfied about.

Complaining isn't just a habit to kick; it's a perspective to change. Tomorrow we'll look at where all this fussing comes from.

FINDING YOURSELF IN THE WILDERNESS

OF A COMPLAINING ATTITUDE

You might be breathing a sigh of relief because the study hasn't been that convicting. Whew, what was I so worried about? Hang on. We've got some rough wilderness to travel today. But before we go on, let's review. So far in our study we've defined what complaining is, and we've seen a significant example of it in the children of Israel.

We understand that the Israelites had a complaining problem. Now we're going to look at the attitudes that come out of our mouths and hearts.

Are You a Complainer?

It's easy to see it in others. It's hard to see it in ourselves. When we complain, we think we're just getting things off our chest. But when other people complain, we respond, "That's not helping anything." I challenge you to ask, "God, am I a complainer?"

What are your favorite or most common complaints? Check all that have come out of your mouth.

- ☐ The amount of work that needs to be done
- ☐ The weather
- ☐ Gasoline prices
- ☐ How your boss treats you
- ☐ Never enough money
- ☐ Incompetent colleagues
- ☐ Traffic, potholes, trucks, or construction
- ☐ The music at church
- ☐ What's on or not on TV
- ☐ What the kids are doing or aren't doing
- ☐ What your spouse is doing or isn't doing
- ☐ Noisy neighbors, noisy children, noisy dogs
- ☐ An unkempt house
- ☐ What the pastor or another church leader did or said
- ☐ What the pastor's wife, neighbor, or in-law did or said
- ☐ We never get to ... / We always have to ...
- ☐ Inept service by unskilled labor
- ☐ People on their cell phones while doing something else
- ☐ Inconvenient requests
- ☐ Spam in your email and direct marketers on the phone

Did we miss some? Add your own complaints here:

Case Study: The Busy Wife

It had been one of those days. Another one in a string of bad days when everything had gone wrong. I felt smothered by a blanket of negative feelings. My husband and I argued even before we left the bedroom. My daughter told me that she needed her gym clothes today (news to me). Our neighbor asked if her son could ride to school with us. Does she think I run a taxi service? I tried concentrating on the positives. We had good kids and a solid marriage. We were all healthy. But something had poked a hole in me, and I was being drained by all the what-ifs in our lives. The list seemed to grow longer every day. "Why, God?" I grumbled. "Why do we have so many problems? We try to be good Christians. We try to do Your will. When are You going to do something?"

Praying didn't seem to help either. A negative, complaining attitude had become a way of life for me. I was no fun anymore. Friends staed away. I was my biggest problem. I grumbled about our budget, and it became tighter. I grumbled about my husband's job, and it became more stressful. I grumbled about people in my family, and our relationships became tenser. I could no longer breathe fresh air. So tonight I pray, "God, please forgive me. I'm sure You've grown tired of hearing my whining. Please help me. I don't know how to live any differently anymore."

What Do You Think?

Can you empathize with this woman's struggle? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If so, in what ways?

Have you ever felt that negative attitudes (like complaining) were smothering you?

☐ Yes ☐ No If so, how would you describe the feeling?

What was the result of this woman's complaining?

Do you think she'll be OK now that she's prayed about it? Why?

Have you ever felt caught in an endless loop of complaining and problems? ☐ Yes ☐ No

What happened?

How did you get out of it? Are you out of it?

Do you need to stop here and talk to the Lord about a lifestyle choice of negative thinking and complaining that has you trapped and frustrated? Ask His Spirit to show you what you need to see in your life right now. Don't drag this burden around any longer.

Are You a Complainer?

Earlier you identified some things you complain about. Take a look at your list. Does it mostly reflect your home life, your work life, your church life, your personal life, or a combination of these? Identify one thing in each of the following categories you'd like to see changed.

Home life:

Work life:

Church life:

Personal life:

Do you complain about these things? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ I don't think so

Who usually hears your grumbling?

Can you identify a pattern of thinking and complaining that you've nurtured in the way you think about a particular area of your life? (Example: The boss is always unfair.)

*Does someone
living by faith
complain?*

What do you say? What are your usual comments?

Circle the one you've complained about longest.

Draw a star beside the one you complain about most passionately.

Underline the one you complain about most.

Draw an arrow beside the one you've never before thought of as complaining.

Be wise! The strongest muscle in the human body is right behind your teeth. What you say comes right from the heart and pours out through the lips. Before you know it, hearts are broken, relationships are damaged, and a dull gray mist has covered all God intended to be beautiful in your life. When you have a complaining attitude, the Spirit of God isn't in control of your heart, so everything that comes out of your mouth is from a human point of view.

Read the following verses from the Bible's wisdom books. Draw principles to confirm in your heart the importance of your words, specifically about negative attitudes that come out of your mouth. State your response in the first person: "When I complain ..." or "I see now that ..." or "The best thing for me to do when ..." Example:

When words are many, transgression is not lacking,
but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

PROVERBS 10:19

Your response: I'm wise when I restrain, control, or limit what comes out of my mouth.
I'm foolish when I let whatever comes into my head spew out of my mouth.

Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth;
keep watch over the door of my lips!

PSALM 141:3

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,
but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.

PROVERBS 10:11

Leave the presence of a fool,
for there you do not meet words of knowledge.

PROVERBS 14:7

Whoever restrains his words has knowledge,
and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.

PROVERBS 17:27

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing his opinion.

PROVERBS 18:2

The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor,
but the lips of a fool consume him.

ECCLESIASTES 10:12

*It won't be automatic
or overnight, but if
you stick with it and
remain sensitive to
what God is teaching
you, lasting joy
and true promised-
land living aren't
as far away as
you might think.*

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

JAMES 1:26

From Our Mouths to God's Ears

Read this comforting truth:

I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.

PSALM 116:1

Yet we also have the sobering truth that God listens to what I say. He hears my complaining attitude, and He hates it. It breaks His heart. It's a slap in His face. It insults His grace. And it makes Him angry.

Why does God take our attitude so personally?

Psalms 7:11 says:

God is a righteous judge,
and a God who feels indignation every day.

PSALM 7:11

Every day? Even now? God still gets angry over His people's negative attitude.

What made God angry in the following verses?

Numbers 11:1

Numbers 11:10

Numbers 11:13,33

But isn't He a God of love? Yes, He is. In His infinite transcendence God can both love us and hate our sin at the same time. God can embrace us and forgive us eternally while judging us in the moment because the attitudes of our hearts are not pleasing to Him.

Ephesians 4:29 provides a good grid for us to evaluate what should be coming out of our mouths. What three criteria do you see for evaluating what you say?

Before you complain, ask yourself the following questions.

Is anything corrupt or rotten coming out of your mouth? Carefully evaluate your words.

Are you meeting a need? Someone else's need, that is. When you give voice to a negative attitude, more often it's to get affirmation, sympathy, or advice that fills your cup. Your complaining is totally self-centered rather than other-centered.

Words are
powerful.
Take them
seriously.

Are you benefiting others? To benefit means a kind act; anything contributing to improvement in a condition; advantage; help. Using that definition, do you want your words to improve rather than impair a situation or someone else's perspective?

If your answers show a complaining attitude, ask God to help you change.

If you're wondering what you can talk about if you stop complaining, here are a few ideas.

Talk about the Lord. Tell others what God has done. Psalm 40:10 states:

I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation.

PSALM 40:10

Pass on knowledge or instruction. Colossians 3:16 directs you to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom."

Learn how to listen. Memorize this verse:

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing his opinion.

PROVERBS 18:2

Before You Make a Formal Complaint

Life is full of imperfections that eat at our peace and prompt us to complain. Next time, before bringing up an issue to an authority, check your attitude. Are you doing good or just stirring the pot of discontentment?

What's your real motive in wanting to complain? Do you want to be noticed? Do you want your own way? Do you want to vent or blame? What does 1 Corinthians 13:4-6 say about motives rooted in love?

Is there a biblical principle behind this issue? Could it be that this is a matter of personal taste or style rather than an issue to complain about? What does 2 Timothy 2:15 assure us if we apply God's Word correctly?

Is this problem something you should address? Does God want you to pray about this rather than confront it at this time? What insight does John 15:5 give in regard to this decision?

Could you be the problem? Is this irritation God's tool of correction or instruction in your life? Could this situation fall in the James 1:2-4 category? Take a look in the mirror.

As this issue stirs in your heart, are you being humble? Are you bearing with others in love? How does your life compare with Ephesians 4:1-3?

Are you demanding that things be done your way? This could be trouble. Seek the Lord on this. Ask Him to give you a submissive heart according to Hebrews 13:17. Before you complain about this issue, what do you need to remember?

Can you state your input in the form of constructive suggestions rather than complaint or criticism? In an effort to apply Colossians 3:12-14, describe the issue as suggestions. Put your list away for a few days; then reread it. Delete anything that hints of anger. Keep whatever is helpful.

Are you willing to be part of the solution? Back up your words with actions and love. Of what practical reality does Colossians 3:23-24 remind you?

Don't Get Tripped Up

As we run hard after the Lord, our complaining attitude is like a pothole in the road. Too frequently, we fall into it, twist our ankles, and scrape our knees and hands. Left unchecked, this wicked attitude will hurt us every time and perhaps keep us from finishing strong.

Hebrews 12:1 says we need to “throw off everything that hinders,” thus avoiding some of “the sin that so easily entangles” (NIV). We’ve seen today that a negative, complaining spirit holds us back. Our negative words are like rocks in our pockets when we’re trying to run. Don’t rationalize your attitude. Rearranging or renaming the same spirit won’t help. You’ve got to dump the rocks on the side of the road and keep running the race.

How have you seen today that complaining disqualifies you from winning?

Can people say of you, “I’ve never heard you complain. You just did your job while fixing your eyes on Jesus”?

When I look to see who is guilty of complaining, Lord, I see my own reflection in the mirror. I’m so sorry for every careless, caustic, self-promoting word I’ve said. I see now that this is a serious problem—one that divides the body, destroys the good, and angers You. Open my eyes to see the root of my sin and to confess it to You. Amen.

FINDING THE ROOT AND PICKING THE FRUIT OF A COMPLAINING ATTITUDE

God never just shrugs off complainers. He deals with them. If you're a chronic complainer, just set your watch: discipline is coming. A time will come when the Lord will say, "That's it!" And you'll learn to hold your tongue. The Lord has 101 ways to help you with that. He never turns His back and says, "Well, that's just the way they are." He will come after you. Complaining isn't just a little problem with attitude; it's a major problem that poisons you and everyone around you. Today we'll study the root and the fruit of complaining. It's not pretty, nor is it easy, but if we're honest, we can't say we're surprised by any of it.

How God Provided

Review in your mind the ways God worked to free His people from bondage in Egypt. Time after time He stepped in with a miracle, and yet the Israelites complained. When they whined to Moses and Aaron, "You have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Ex. 16:3, NIV), God heard their complaints and provided manna from heaven. When they grumbled about a lack of water, God provided water from a rock. He protected them from their enemies, gave them His commandments, and filled the tabernacle with His glory.

Yet the Israelites continued to complain about their hardships. Then they grumbled about the manna, and God said, "Enough!" He sent them meat but accompanied it with a plague (see Num. 11). When they reached the promised land, they again began grumbling in unbelief:

Why Do People Complain?

- ☐ *They have a lot of problems.*
- ☐ *They feel helpless.*
- ☐ *They'd rather talk about a problem than solve it.*
- ☐ *They've lost heart.*
- ☐ *They don't think there's a solution.*

If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?

NUMBERS 14:2-3, NIV

The Lord heard their grumbling and instructed Moses and Aaron to tell them:

As surely as I live, declares the LORD, I will do to you the very things I heard you say: In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land. ... As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected.

NUMBERS 14:28-31, NIV

Moses wanted those people to see the God he had seen in that burning bush and to trust the cloud that unerringly moved toward the land promised them, but they didn't. He wanted them to love the manna and to have a heavenly appetite that enjoys a heavenly food, but they didn't. He wanted them to be amazed by the ways God protected them and to be grateful for His attention and for hearing them all those years, but they didn't. The more they complained, the worse things got.

Is your memory as short as the Israelites'? As soon as everything wasn't going the way they wanted it, they began to doubt and grumble. Are you like that? What amazing acts of God in your life are you forgetting?

Are you reaping the consequences in your relationship with God? Do you wonder why life is a wilderness right now? Could a negative, complaining attitude be the problem? If God could whisper into your heart right now, you're hear Him say, *I'm listening. I hear everything you say. I hear every thought you think—all of it. You'll never know My joy if you keep that up.* If your life lacks a sense of God's favor and presence, ask yourself, *Could it be my attitude?*

Be Careful What You Demand

The Israelites complained about manna and demanded meat, and the Lord told them He would give them meat to eat. The Lord said:

You shall not eat just one day ... but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before him, saying, "Why did we come out of Egypt?"

NUMBERS 11:19-20

The Lord, knowing their hearts, knew they'd rejected Him for their appetites. So He gave them what they thought they wanted. He sent a wind to bring quail in from the sea, and they covered the ground three feet deep for a day's walk in any direction. The scene must have been like a riot: people screaming, birds flapping their wings, everywhere the chaotic movement of a meat-hungry people in a sea of birds. The birds were everywhere, pecking and squawking. And while they were chewing the quail, "the LORD struck the people with a very severe plague" (Num 11:33, NASB), and they died by the hundreds. Instead of dancing, they mourned. Instead of grace, they grieved. And all who had been greedy died and were buried. So they named this cemetery place *Kibroth-hattaavah*, "graves of gluttony" (Num. 11:34, NLT).

Don't allow your flesh to win. Reflect on the following questions and record your responses.

Are you restless in your faith because you haven't seen an answer to an important prayer?

Have you been grumbling because you've trusted God for a need you feel He hasn't met?

Have you been ungrateful for what the Lord has given you?

They Listened to Others Who Were Complaining.

"The rabble who were among them had greedy desires" (Num. 11:4, NASB). God's people were listening to "the rabble." When they left Egypt, some people among them weren't Jews. Theirs was a mixed multitude. The Gentiles who didn't know the Israelites' God were mixed in with the Israelites who did. Naturally, you could expect different attitudes. The Israelites chose to listen to those who didn't walk by faith.

Who stirs up your lack of faith? Those who don't know the Lord? Those who have never tasted His goodness? Those who haven't received the pardon of heaven and the forgiveness of sin? Do you sometimes listen to those people when it's hard to trust God?

Reflect on a time when you let someone outside the faith influence your attitude.

Agree or Disagree?
Complaining amplifies frustration, spreads discontent and discord, and can invoke an invitation for the destroyer to cause havoc with our lives.

[God] gave them their request; But sent leanness into their soul.
Psalm 106:15, NKJV

They Focused on What They Didn't Have

The people griped, “We’re up to here with manna.” Never mind that they were free. Never mind that God had saved them from their enemies in dramatic, awesome ways. Never mind that they had a visual reminder by day and by night that God was with them. Never mind that their leader talked with God on a regular basis. Never mind that their shoes and their clothes never wore out. Never mind all that. They were just sick of the food. They focused on what they didn’t have. They were not grateful for what God provided. He gave them manna—“the bread of the angels,” the psalmist called it (Ps. 78:25). But they didn’t want it; they were used to Egyptian food.

The parallel is painfully close to home. Do you start to complain when you focus on what you don’t have rather than trusting God to provide what you need? It happens every time you forget all you’ve received from God’s hand.

Identify the blessings you’ve received from God lately.

What pattern of thinking could develop over time if complaining isn’t stopped? Fill in the following sentences by placing the words in an order that will naturally follow when complaining is allowed to go unchecked. Be ready to explain your thinking about why this order will occur.

Dissatisfaction	Disobedience	Lack of faith	Skepticism	Grumbling
Bitterness	Resentment	Rebellion	Criticizing leaders	
Cynicism	Doubting God			

_____ leads to _____, which leads to _____, which leads to _____, which leads to _____, which leads to _____, which leads to _____, which leads to _____, which leads to _____, and this leads far away from God.

Three Common Complaints

The Israelite’s wilderness journey exposes the root of their complaints—some serious attitude sins! These three complaints get us into trouble every time. Be honest and see if you find yourself in these accounts in the Book of Numbers.

Complaints of the flesh. Numbers 11 makes even the strongest leaders weep when they get a clear picture of what God and Moses had to put up with while trying to lead the people out of Egypt into the promised land: “The people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD” (v. 1, NIV). What was the root of their complaint? Food! They craved food other than what the Lord was providing. They wailed:

If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!

NUMBERS 11:4-6, NIV

The Israelites completely lost their direction. They forgot they were eating food they didn’t work for, pay for, or do anything to get except pick it up. But they whined, “We don’t want it! We want Egypt!” They let the things they tasted, touched, smelled, and felt dictate the priorities of their lives.

It may sound foolish to learn that the Israelites made a big stink over food, but what fleshly pursuit or entitlement has been the subject of your complaints?

Complaints of jealousy. Another dangerous complaint that's buried in each one of us like a ticking bomb is unearthed in Numbers 12:1: "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married" (NASB). On the surface their complaint seemed to be about Moses' choice of a wife, but then their real complaint came out. They said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" (v. 2, NASB). God put Moses in charge and demanded that the people respect him, and Moses' own brother and sister couldn't stand it. Their complaint didn't come from physical appetite; they complained because of pride.

Are you complaining because no one recognizes your gifts? Are you criticizing leaders' flaws?
Are you murmuring because someone besides you is getting attention and praise?

☐ **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐ **Sometimes**

Complaints of authority. In Numbers 13 the complaints against Moses and Aaron really heated up. What's key for us is the way they handled it.

At the Lord's command Moses chose 12 men to spy out the land of Canaan. He sent the best men from each tribe. Joshua and Caleb led them across the Jordan to establish a strategy, but they returned with two different reports. Caleb was full of faith. He said, "We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it" (v. 30, NASB). But the other men "gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report ... saying, 'The land ... devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size' " (v. 32, NASB). They totally lost sight of God.

The people spent all night complaining against Moses and Aaron. Their plan was to kill them, appoint a new leader, and return to Egypt. Did they think God would open the Red Sea for them again? Or that the Egyptians would be happy to see them after they had drowned their whole army? What began as a lack of confidence in themselves led to lack of confidence in their leader and ended with a complete lack of faith in God

Complaining is addictive. The cycle goes like this. You've got a problem. You complain and get stuck in the problem. The enemy of your soul takes advantage and causes you to complain more. You live in constant crisis.

Complaining Is Destructive

God sees our complaining as an insult to His provision. When the Israelites did it, He destroyed them. Paul later warned:

[Do not] grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.
Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written
for our instruction.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:10-11

Take the warning.

Complaining Can Make You Sick

Solomon said, “A calm and peaceful and tranquil heart is life and health to the body” (Prov. 14:30, AMP). How many “calm and peaceful” complainers do you know?

“When the people complained, it displeased the LORD” (Num. 11:1, NKJV). Having looked at ways God dealt with the Israelites, we understand that He takes complaining personally. He considers our grouching an act of unbelief directed toward Him. He’s the One who provides us life and breath, health and security, food and drink. Yet when we complain, we’re saying that His provision isn’t good enough. “What have You done for me lately, God? And why haven’t You done this for me?” Our complaints are insults, verbalizing that we don’t trust Him to provide, protect, and order our lives. To the Lord, complaining feels like an accusation that He’s not taking care of us.

Do you see God’s point? ☐ Yes ☐ No Why?

Knowing that God takes complaining this way, how do you feel about your negative attitudes?

The root of complaining is unbelief. In contrast to this attitude, a believer knows this:

**For those who love God all things work together for good,
for those who are called according to his purpose.**

ROMANS 8:28

What’s needed for someone who is trapped in a habit of complaining to receive the truth of Romans 8:28?

*They despised the
pleasant land,
having no faith
in his promise.*

*They murmured
in their tents,
and did not obey
the voice
of the LORD.*

Psalms 106:24-25

Paul warned Christians to avoid the danger of complaining: “Nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer” (1 Cor. 10:10). Complaining opens the door to Satan’s destructive strategies. Our whining alerts the predator that a victim is in the neighborhood.

How could Satan use our complaining for his purposes?

How have you seen Satan do this in your life?

How does complaining run counter to Ephesians 4:12-15 and Colossians 1:18?

Lord, please perform radical surgery in my heart and show me the vast benefits of a life of faith. Take away my panic and the fear, replacing them with a calm, quiet confidence that You’re worthy of every ounce of my trust. You’re more worthy than I can begin to understand. Convict me of my complaining spirit. Cause me to hate the offense that hurts our relationship. I now see complaining as sin and confess it, turn from it, and run to You. I entrust to You my biggest, hardest struggle right now and wait in faith for You. Amen.

WEEK 1 WRAPPING UP THE WILDERNESS

DAY 5 OF A COMPLAINING ATTITUDE

I don't know about you, but I'm sick of these Israelites who wouldn't trust God. I'm weary of their complaining. I'm frustrated by their inability to see a bigger picture. I'm angry because they insulted God. No wonder God decided they would all die in the wilderness.

I want to be honest in my walk with Christ, so I have to confess that one reason I'm ready to move on is because their story hits way too close to home. I could have easily been one of those who died in the desert. Oh, you too? Thanks for your honesty. I'd like to think I would have chosen differently. I love the thought of standing with Joshua and Caleb, filled with faith and ready to take the land. But I can't be sure I would have done that. Why? Because I know my heart. God had this distressing account written down and referenced in many places in the Bible because He knows all our hearts, and He wanted to get this message to us wherever we turned in His Word. "Each of us has turned to his own way," wrote the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 53:6, NASB).

- All of us have been guilty of craving things God doesn't want us to have.
- All of us have been blasé about amazing miracles God has done all around us.
- All of us have doubted His power to provide.
- All of us have forgotten "his works and the wonders" He has shown us (Ps. 78:11).
- All of us have refused to believe, at one time or another, that He was more than what we imagined He could be.
- We've all complained in a dark moment that God just isn't enough. If we've ever wondered whether God will forgive us if we turn in repentance, this is the moment to believe. We've spent four focused days looking at the children of Israel, looking at ourselves, and looking at the Lord.

Here's what we've learned this week.

Day 1: What complaining is and what it isn't

Day 2: What the Israelites did that made God so angry

Day 3: How to recognize a negative, complaining attitude in your spirit

Day 4: The root and fruit of complaining and how they affect your relationship with God

Today let's review the principles and consequences of a negative, complaining attitude so that the Lord can permanently write them on our hearts.

What immediately comes to mind? A Scripture verse? Something you've learned about God?
About yourself? About others?

Case Study: The Lost Job

I was sobered and convicted by the words I read in Numbers 11. The parallel between me and the Israelites was all too clear. God had heard my grumbling when I lost my job 10 months ago. He understood the fear and anxiety behind all my noise and provided for our family in miraculous ways. We didn't starve or even get behind on our bills, yet I was restless and ungrateful. My pride was hurt by this layoff and the realization of how much I needed to trust God.

When I found another job, I continued to grumble even more because it wasn't the perfect job. Instead of praising God for the amazing things He was doing in my wife's spiritual life, I was envious. The thing she feared (my losing my job) had come true, yet she had never trusted Him more and been more satisfied with Him. I secretly nurtured my bruised ego and even blamed God for my lack of fulfillment in this new position. I know firsthand about the grace of God, as Exodus 34:6-7 describes:

The LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

EXODUS 34:6-7

God had been gracious to me and slow to anger, but as the story about the Israelites revealed, His patience has a limit. I knew if I continued to grumble, I would be in danger of experiencing His punishment. I also knew that whether I acknowledged my complaining as sin, God considered it sin. Left unchecked, grumbling has the power to kill my relationships with God and with other people. It can also cause me to be unfaithful to God, to turn to other sources to find answers to needs that can be met only in Him. "Oh God, help me. I'm so sorry. I see my sin, and I'm turning around.

Did this man have a good reason to complain? ☐ Yes ☐ No Why?

Why had he and his wife experienced different spiritual journeys during this time of his job change?

What attribute of God had the study of Numbers 11 brought to light?

Does God's judgment negate His grace? ☐ Yes ☐ No Complement it? ☐ Yes ☐ No

How did you relate to this man's honest admissions?

How do fear and discouragement prompt unbelief? What other emotion or mindset prompts you to complain?

How have you been tempted to turn to sources other than God to find answers to needs that can be met only in Him?

Express Your Satisfaction with God

Read Psalm 13:1-6. Use the following outline to pour out your heart to God.

Step 1. Verbalize your pain (see vv. 1-2).

Step 2. Ask for help (see vv. 3-4).

Step 3. State your trust in God (see v. 5).

Step 4. Commit yourself to praise (see v. 6).

Look back over your week's notes. What new insights did you gain?

What understanding of the way God works was refreshed?

How does God want you to respond to what He has shown you?

Write a prayer expressing to God your heart about negative thinking and disbelief.

Lord, change my complaining attitude ...

Are You Willing to Repent?

Are you willing to turn from your sinful attitude, acknowledge that it's wrong before God, and ask Him to change you? We've been studying the Old Testament in this lesson, but we celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ. He died to provide a way for us to be forgiven and cleansed and have a fresh start in life and in our attitudes. I've personally struggled with complaining over the years, and I'm really thankful for a wife who many times took me aside and said, "Your attitude isn't helping anything; we need to pray about this." So Kathy and I sat down and prayed, "God, I'm sorry for my attitude. It's wrong. I know it's not pleasing to You. Please forgive me and cleanse me." He's faithful to do that in my life, as He is for you.

Every person reading this Bible study has something that's difficult about which they could complain. God wants us to trust Him with that. But when all we do is complain about that thing, whatever it is, we turn away from all the good things He has done. I know it's hard. But hear a pastor's heart. You're forfeiting the grace that could help you through that trial by complaining about it instead of embracing it as a tool God uses to keep you humble and keep you close to Him. Maybe you say, "But I was close to Him." He wants you closer. I'm not making light of how hard it is. I'm trying, as lovingly as I know how, to draw the connection between the wilderness existence you're now experiencing and the attitude of resenting that point of adversity in your life. God hears our complaints about a specific combination of circumstances that might be stretching us or about something He's allowed to keep us close and humble, but He won't tolerate our complaining about it repeatedly. Instead of disrespecting God with your complaints, see this as your best opportunity to draw near to Him and let Him provide what you need for the situation.

By God's Grace I'm Changing

I Would
Normally Murmur

Now I'll Say

When I hear that someone
else in my office will
attend a conference
I was hoping to attend ...

When my flight is delayed
for the third time, I
approach the ticket counter
and say ...

When the other carpool
mom calls and says
her entire family has
the flu and she won't
be able to drive tomorrow, I say ...

When my wife tells me that my
blue suit is still at the cleaners, I ...

When my spouse
announces the possibility of
a job change and a move
to a new city, I ...

When a fairly new believer in my
small group calls to tell me about
a need, but it escalates more into
a gripe session, I ...

Breaking free from a lifelong pattern of grumbling isn't easy. It takes faith and courage, as well as a conscious effort not to slip back into old habits. Train yourself to listen for that whine in your voice, to repent immediately, and to turn your grumbling into praise. In next week's lesson we'll learn how to replace your complaining attitude with a thankful attitude.