

# SUNDAY ARTICLE

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## Grumble Free

Scott Hubbard

“Do all things without grumbling” (Philippians 2:14). It’s remarkably easy to breeze by this command without really hearing those two intrusive words: *all things*.

Do *all things* without grumbling? Yes, all things: Wake up with a sore throat, receive criticism, pay a parking ticket, shovel spring snow, host houseguests, discipline your children, change a flat tire, answer emails, and do everything else without one murmuring word. “This is a hard saying,” we might be tempted to say. “Who can listen to it?” (John 6:60).

Many of us wake up set to “grumble,” and move through our days murmuring at a great variety of objects that get in our way. We may dress it up in nicer words: “venting,” “being honest,” “getting something off my chest,” or even “sharing a prayer request.” But God knows what we’re doing – and if we really think about it, we often do too. Grumbling is the hum of the fallen human heart, and often a hallmark of Christians’ indwelling sin.

And that makes non-grumblers a peculiar people in this world. As Paul goes on to tell us, those who “do all things without grumbling” burn like great suns in a world of darkness (Philippians 2:14–15).

### The Voice of Discontentment

Paul’s use of the word grumbling (and his reference to Deuteronomy 32:5 in the next verse) takes us back to the desert between Egypt and Canaan, where we meet that group of experienced grumblers. What do their forty years in the wilderness teach us about grumbling?

They teach us that grumbling is discontentment made audible – the heart’s contempt escaped through the mouth. It is the sound we make when we have “a strong craving” for something we do not have, and we begin to grow restless (Numbers 11:4; Psalm 106:14).

The object of our craving need not be evil; often it isn’t. The Israelites, for example, reached for pleasures quite harmless in themselves: food and water (Exodus 15:24; 16:2–3; 17:3), a safe passage to the Promised Land (Numbers 14:2–4), comfort (Numbers 16:41). But their desires for these good things somehow turned bad: they wanted them sooner than God chose to give them; they wanted them more than God himself.

So too with us. We want a relaxing evening at home, but we get a call from a friend who needs help moving. We want a job that feels meaningful, but we get stuck among spreadsheets. Or, more significantly, we want the future we planned for, but we get one we never wanted.

“Unfair,” says some voice within us. “That’s not right,” says another. Desires become expectations; expectations become rights. And instead of bringing our disappointment to God, and allowing his words to steady us, we let unmet desire fester into discontentment. We grumble.

### Murmuring Against Our Good

Grumbling is more than the voice of discontentment, however. It is also the voice of unbelief. We grumble when our faith in God’s good purposes falters. Unwilling to trust that God is crafting this disappointment for our good, we have eyes only for the painful now.

When the Israelites finished burying the last of the wilderness generation, Moses revealed God’s purpose in all their desert trials: “[God] led you

through the great and terrifying wilderness...that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end” (Deuteronomy 8:15–16). What a tragic commentary on those graves in the desert. On every tombstone in that wilderness were carved the words, “We grumbled against our own good.”

God had already told them as much after their first episode of grumbling. He presented them with a choice: They could either “diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God” (Exodus 15:26), or they could follow the raging mob within themselves. Well, we know the story. They followed the mob.

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Our own grumbling, likewise, relies on an interpretation of God, ourselves, and this world that is utterly out of step with reality. (Of course, it feels like reality; the serpent's voice always does.) We grumble because we have diligently listened to a voice other than the Lord our God's, and have begun to repeat the words. Instead of crying out to God, "Help me trust you are good!" we mutter and spill and vent – the equivalent of saying, "God, your ways are not good."

## Let Go of Grumbling

Like all temptations common to man, the temptation to grumble always comes with "the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). But how? How can we confront our own tendencies to murmur and, amazingly, begin to "do all things without grumbling" (Philippians 2:14)?

### 1. Repent of wayward desires.

When you do recognize some grumbling words, stop and ask yourself,

- What am I wanting right now more than I want God's will?
- What craving has become more important than God's commandments?
- What desire has grown sweeter than knowing Christ Jesus my Lord?

Grumbling does not spout forth from us because of a problem out there, but because of a problem in here. No outward circumstance compels us to grumble. The same apostle who said, "Do all things without grumbling," was wearing chains for the gospel as he wrote. Yet Philippians is drenched in gratitude, not grumbling (Philippians 1:3; 4:14). More than that, at the centre of Paul's letter is a Saviour who humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross, without one murmur (Philippians 2:5–8).

God has given us everything we need to let go of grumbling – even in prison, even on the road to our own execution. In addition to recognizing our grumbling, then, we need to repent of those wayward desires that would keep us from saying with Paul, "It is my eager expectation and hope that...Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death," whether by comfort or disappointment, whether by hope fulfilled or hope deferred (Philippians 1:20).

### 2. Remember God's word of life.

Because our grumbling relies on a false interpretation of reality, we need God to reinterpret our

circumstances for us. Therefore, as Paul tells us, we put away grumbling by "holding fast to the word of life" (Philippians 2:16).

Hold fast implies effort and attention. Grumbling will rarely flee if we merely wave around vague thoughts of God's goodness. We need to take specific words from God and, with ruthless intensity, hold on to them tighter than we hold on to our words of discontentment.

What words from God should we hold fast to in these moments? Any that confront our inner clamour of voices with the truth of God's abundant goodness (Psalm 31:19), our benefits in Christ (Psalm 103:1–5), the brightness of our future (1 Peter 1:3–9), God's sovereignty over trials (James 1:2–4), and the pleasures of obedience (Psalm 19:10–11), for example.

Or, to stick near the context of Paul's command, consider holding on to this gem of a promise: "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). Glorious riches for every need are ours in Christ. Hold fast to that word.

### 3. Respond to God in faith.

Finally, take these words and turn them back to the God who is our very present help (Psalm 46:1). In other words, replace grumbling with its righteous opposite: prayer. Every decision to grumble is a decision not to pray, not to pour out our hearts before God, not to draw near to his powerful throne of grace. Likewise, every decision to pray is a decision not to grumble.

Of course, even in prayer the fight continues. Our minds will often wander back to whatever person or circumstance has agitated us. But keep bringing your mind back around. Keep wrangling your focus back to the God who made you, knows you, loves you, bought you, and will bring your holiness to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

Grumbling cannot abide in the presence of this Jesus. Over time, it must make way for gratitude. It must bow the knee to faith. It must give way to praise.

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