

Message #7
Philippians: The Promise of Joy

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MUMBLE GRUMBLE PHILIPPIANS 2:14-16

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Complaining is part of the American way of life. We are blessed to live in a country where we are free to do that. In Russia, by contrast, some 16,000 people have been arrested for publicly complaining about their government's assault upon Ukraine.

In America complaining is an art form. We have learned how to complain about inflation and the economy and politicians. We complain about presidents and legislators and governors and mayors. Republicans complain about Democrats, and Democrats complain about Republicans. Taxpayers complain about all of the politicians who spend too much of their money.

Stores and companies have complaint departments, although the titles of the departments today usually have more pleasant sounding names. There are government agencies and consumer advocacy groups who devote a large part of their resources to dealing with complaints: the FCC, the FTC, the SEC, the ICC, state consumer protection agencies, state departments of children and families, the Better Business Bureau. If that is not enough, I discovered this week that there is a federal government website with the address usa.gov/complaints.

In work places complaining about the boss or other people in management is a safe topic of conversation. There are psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors who get paid for listening to us complain. We complain about our wife or our husband, or together we complain about our kids. The kids complain to their friends and sometimes their teachers about their parents. The teachers in turn complain to each other and to school administrators about the kids and their behavioral problems. The school administrators complain about the lack of freedom that they have to discipline the kids and bring that complaint back to the--- yes, you guessed it--- the poor politicians.

A psychologist by the name of Travis Bradberry claims that people complain an average of one time a minute. More significantly, he cites Stanford University research to argue that **“Repeated complaining rewires your brain to make future complaining more likely.”** (talentsmarteq.com “How Complaining Rewires Your Brain”)

With all of the complaining that goes on in the world it sure is refreshing to know that complaining is not an issue among Christians or in churches. As hard as you may find it to believe, complaining was a problem at times in the first century churches. The Apostle Paul heard complaints from churches with which he had been involved. He heard about complaining within some of these churches.

The church at Philippi in Greece (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIPPI MAP) was one of the better congregations around. It had proved to be very supportive of Paul's ministry. But in #3 of Paul's letter to the Philippians we learn that there was a dispute between two of the leading women in the congregation, and that meant that there were complaints involved. Given the fact that the Christians in Philippi were faced with persecution for their faith, he knew that complaining was a potential problem. So he makes brief reference in the text before us this morning to God's perspective on the subject.

So far in our study of Paul's letter to the Philippians we have discovered that Paul was a prisoner in Rome (PHILIPPI MAP 2) awaiting trial to determine his right to preach the gospel. Though his circumstances were difficult, he was rejoicing because good things were happening on the spiritual front. At the end of the first chapter it becomes clear that the Philippians were also faced with opposition to their faith. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The main thing that they need to do, Paul says, is to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. One of the primary characteristics of a worthy walk is unity among Christians. The key to maintaining this unity, Paul explains in the beginning of #2, is focusing on the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who humbled Himself in becoming a man and in dying on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Because God is at work in us, Christians have the power to exhibit this humility. Thus, according to v. 12, we are to work out our salvation.

I.

Biblical theology is always practical. One tangible result of the working out of Christian salvation should be a decrease in complaining. That necessitates a change of attitude. For first century Christians living in Philippi and faced with persecution, to complain was a temptation. It was also a threat to unity. To twenty-first century Christians living in a self-centered, materialistic culture, complaining is also a temptation. In v. 14 of our passage the apostle describes THE NATURE OF COMPLAINING. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE NATURE OF COMPLAINING) Paul writes, **“Do all things without grumbling or disputing...”**

The word translated by our English Standard translation as “grumbling” was originally used by the Greeks to describe the cooing sound that doves make. Out of that usage the word came to have the idea of murmuring, eventually in the negative sense of grumbling. “Grumbling” has the connotation of subdued complaining. The association in this verse with the term “disputing” suggests to me that Paul was talking about open complaining. So the English word which the NIV and New King James translations use as “complaining” is legitimate.

When complaining becomes more open and vocal and aggressive, it takes the form of disputing. Disputing is what happens when complaining is unresolved. Initially there was grumbling and complaining when the administration turned down the idea of letting the Ukrainians have MIG-29 fighter jets that come from Poland. That objection has become more vocal in recent days when Democrats in Congress as well as

Republicans have begun to object to the rejection of that offer from Poland. That is an illustration of disputing.

As Paul wrote these words about complaining and disputing, he had a specific situation in Israel's history in mind. Paul as a rabbi was trained in the study of the Hebrew Bible. So he was well aware that the classic example of complaining in the Old Testament was the behavior of the nation of Israel when it was brought out of Egypt by God and began to wander in the wilderness. Paul refers to this negativity on the part of the Hebrews in #10 of 1 Corinthians. (1 CORINTHIANS 10:10) He says in v. 10 to the Christians at Corinth, “[Do not] grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.”

Then also in our passage in v. 15 Paul uses the expression “crooked and twisted generation.” In the Greek language that Paul used, that was the same expression that appeared in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that Greek-speaking Jews used in the first century in Deuteronomy #32 v. 5. There Moses was describing Israel's bad behavior in the wilderness.

So to help us understand the kind of negative behavior that Paul is talking about we are going to turn to the Old Testament to see what the Hebrews did and how God responded to it. In referring to the behavior of the ancient Israelites Paul is implying that the Gentile Christians are now part of the people of God who should learn from the errors of their spiritual ancestors. We will look first at the second book of the Bible, Exodus. In #15 just three days after God delivered the Hebrews from the pursuing Egyptian army and brought them miraculously through the Red Sea, the people began to complain that there was no water. (EXODUS 15:24) Verse 24 says, “**And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we to drink?’**”

The Lord miraculously provided the people with water. A few days later they complained about a lack of food. (EXODUS 16:2) Chapter 16 v. 2 says, “**And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.**” So God provided them with manna to eat. (EXODUS 16:8) But Moses says in #16 v. 8, “**...what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord.**” The real issue, Moses says, is the failure of the Hebrews to trust God.

In #17 they again run low on water, and they again start complaining. (EXODUS 17:7) In v. 7 of #17 the text says, “**...the people of Israel... tested the Lord by saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’**” The complaint of the Israelites is a reflection of a problem of unbelief.

As time goes by the complaining gets worse. It comes out into the open as arguing and disputing. In the fourth book of the Bible, Numbers #16, a fellow by the name of Korah rises up with 250 other people and challenges the right of Moses and Aaron to lead the people. These rebels openly argue with Moses. (NUMBERS 16:3) In v. 3 of #16 in Numbers they say to Moses, “**Why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of**

the Lord?" In other words, "Who says that you get to be our leader?" Well, the God who delivered them from Egypt had said it, but these rebels were not believing in God.

So God responds with another miracle and instantly kills all of these rebels. But that is not the end of the matter. (NUMBERS 16:41) In v. 41 of #16 the text says, **"But on the next day all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, 'You have killed the people of the Lord.'"** Complaining has led to open argument and disputing, which has produced disunity and has ultimately brought judgment from God. The people still don't get the picture. So the Lord again responds with judgment, this time in the form of a plague. (NUMBERS 16:49) Numbers 16:49 says, **"Now those who died in the plague were 14,700, besides those who died in the affair of Korah."**

There are other incidents of complaining by the people during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The ones which we have looked at are sufficient to show that complaining can be a very destructive thing. Complaining in the eyes of God is not a little sin, especially when it is chronic, especially when it produces behavior that is contrary to the revealed will of God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

These incidents in Old Testament history also help us to understand more specifically the kind of negative behavior that Paul was talking about in his admonition in Philippians #2. Paul was talking about an attitude that voices a belief that one's circumstances are unacceptable. This kind of attitude among Christians says, in effect, that God is doing a bad job with us. He is messing up. This attitude of discontent reflects a lack of belief in God. It is a denial of the New Testament promise that all things work together for good to those who love God. It is a denial of the promise that God works all things after the counsel of His will. It is a denial of the promise that God is at work in our lives to will and to work His good pleasure. Either He must not be sovereign, or He must not be good.

When Paul and Silas were dragged by an angry mob before the magistrates in Philippi and beaten without a trial, their rights as Roman citizens were violated. They were then thrown into the worst part of the city jail. But Paul and Silas did not moan and complain. They accepted the fact that their circumstances were part of the will of God. So they prayed and sang hymns. This behavior, combined with an earthquake and other divinely arranged circumstances, led to the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his family.

Now when representatives of the magistrates came the next day to order Paul and Silas to be released, Paul objected. He proved to the jailer that he was a Roman citizen and made mention of the fact that his treatment had been a serious violation of Roman law. We might regard this response by Paul as complaining. But it was not the kind of complaining that Paul was talking about in our passage. Paul accepted what had happened to him as being part of the will of God, but he also used his citizenship to force the Philippian rulers to be more tolerant of the Christians in Philippi. If they persecuted the Christians there, Paul just might take his mistreatment to higher authorities. So Paul accepted his situation, but he brought the matter of injustice to the proper authorities. There is a place for accountability and seeking justice and

appropriate rights under the law, especially when the cause of Christ may be advanced and/or when others will be helped.

At the time when Paul was writing this letter, he was a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial to determine whether he had violated Roman law in his preaching of the gospel. The Jews had brought charges against Paul in Judea before a Roman governor. When Paul sensed that he wasn't going to be treated fairly, he exercised his right to appeal to Rome for justice.

We might tend to think of that as a kind of complaint. But it also was not the kind of negative behavior that Paul was talking about. For Paul was looking at this as an opportunity to bring the gospel to Rome. He saw it as an opportunity to vindicate his preaching of the gospel of Christ and to have the proclamation of the Christian message ruled as being permissible in the empire. He also saw his circumstances as being fully within the will of God. He expressed willingness to die for his cause if the Romans decided against him.

Notice that in his writings from prison, Paul does not complain about the food. He does not complain about being a prisoner. He does not express a belief that his circumstances are unfair or somehow beyond what God should allow.

Later in this same book Paul (4:11) says, "**I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.**" The complaining that Paul is talking about is the attitude that says that I cannot accept the circumstances in which God has placed me. "I cannot have contentment and peace with God unless my circumstances change." "I cannot accept this situation if my wife is going to act like this." "I cannot accept these circumstances if my husband doesn't change his way of being in this area." "If the church gets a red carpet for the sanctuary, I cannot tolerate that. I am outta here."

So Paul says in v. 14 of Philippians #2, "**Do all things without grumbling or disputing...**" In the Greek sentence structure that Paul used, the term that he put first was "all things." Greek is different from English in that subjects and objects and verbs don't have to appear in a particular order. By putting "all things" first in the sentence Paul was putting emphasis on the comprehensive nature of his admonition. "**Do all things** without grumbling or disputing..." Most of us are able to do some things without complaining. But Paul is saying that Christians should strive to do all things without complaining.

There is a place for resolving injustice and wrongdoing and errors and oversights. There is a place for expressing opinions and viewpoints and preferences. There is a place for accountability in the family and the church and the workplace and the school and the government. But those matters need to be handled with the right attitude, and those matters need to be brought to the attention of the proper people.

I had a woman in my church years ago who was a classic complainer. She was always unhappy about something. It was good on one hand that she brought her complaints to

me since I was the pastor there. But she was an individual who had not learned contentment, and her complaints were regular and often without much significance. She complained about the singers, and she complained about the style of music, and she complained about one of the musicians. She complained about the subjects of the Bible studies, and she complained about other people. I eventually got tired of the complaining and became less and less sympathetic. Finally she went to another church. The unfortunate thing was that her complaining and her lack of contentment infected other people. Fortunately we don't have much of a problem with that here. Let's work to keep it that way.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE REASONS NOT TO COMPLAIN) Let's consider then THE REASONS NOT TO COMPLAIN. Why is complaining a major concern to Paul and to the Lord?

A.

First, complaining, in the way that the Apostle Paul describes it, is a DENIAL OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD. (II. THE REASONS... A. DENIAL OF THE...) In v. 13 Paul said, "...**God ... works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.**" If God is sovereign, and if He is really at work in our lives, we have no right to complain about our circumstances. He has allowed them to occur for His good purpose. That is not to say that He may not want us to work to change our circumstances. Sometimes He does. There is a Biblical basis for defending one's country against invading Russians. There is a Biblical basis for mourning genuine losses. The Psalms show us that there is a Biblical basis for crying out to God about injustices in our world. But, as Paul said, we need to strive for a certain contentment in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, whether we are faced with health challenges or job challenges or school challenges or family challenges..

When we grumble and complain about our circumstances, we are in effect rebelling against God. We are denying His sovereignty. We are doubting His goodness and His power to meet our needs. We are implying that we could do a better job of running things and are doubting His wisdom in doing what He is doing and allowing what He is allowing. Life doesn't always make sense to us. It didn't make sense to me that it had to be Saturday night that my wife got sick and that I had to take her to the Emergency Room last Sunday morning.

When we look at Paul's circumstances, we might be tempted to think that he had good reasons to complain. He had faithfully served God in evangelizing and planting churches in many places in the Roman Empire. Yet now in his later years he is a prisoner, chained to a Roman soldier 24 hours a day. For two years before that he was imprisoned back in Judea. Paul could have complained about the guards, about the Roman judges, and about Christians who maybe didn't visit and support him enough. He could have complained about his finances and about his health. He could have complained about the freedom that was denied him.

Yet Paul in his New Testament letters doesn't complain about his situation. Why? Because he knew that God was sovereign. He saw his circumstances as being allowed by God and as being opportunities for serving Him. So he evangelized the guards, and he evangelized people who came to see him. He lived above his circumstances, and he rejoiced to see many of these guards and even some from Caesar's own household converted to Christ.

It is hard not to complain because complaining is so acceptable in the culture around us. We are tempted to complain about our bosses, our government, our friends, our church, our husbands, our wives, our parents, and our kids. But when we grumble and complain in the way that Paul was speaking about, we deny God's sovereignty over our lives and miss out on the good purposes that He is seeking to work out in us.

A complaining mother in her later years wrote this poem:

Just yesterday it seems my children
Played upon the floor
And I wiped countless fingerprints
From window pane and door.

I kissed away a thousand tears
And darned sock after sock
And tried to keep pace with the hands
That raced around the clock.

And often when at end of day
Too tired to sleep, in bed I lay,
I'd think how nice, when children grown,
My time again should be my own.

So now I sit and rock alone,
My hands at rest, the work all done;
No little tots upon the floor,
No fingerprints upon the door,

No socks to mend bruises to kiss---
Ah me! How could I know I'd miss
The very things I grudged to do
Dear God, if only there might be
Someone again who needed me!

B.

A second reason not to complain is that complaining causes **DISRUPTION OF UNITY**. (II. A. B. **DISRUPTION OF UNITY**) Unity is a primary concern in this context. The concern about maintaining unity is the reason that Paul introduced the subject of humility.

In the Old Testament passage which we looked at in Numbers 16, we saw the job that complaining did on Israel. Korah started grumbling and complaining about Moses' leadership. Rather than talking directly to Moses about it first, or evaluating his feelings in terms of what God thought about the subject, he apparently talked to 250 other Hebrew leaders. Together they went to Moses with their complaint. This grumbling and complaining developed into an open dispute and argument. God had made it clear that Moses was to be the leader, and now he reinforced that directive with judgment upon the rebels. The leaders of the rebellion were killed by a supernatural judgment. The dispute had led to further disunity. Others had been exposed to the complaining, and others got worked up about the matter, and many got mad with Moses for the judgment of God upon the leaders of the rebellion. So God had to again intervene, and thousands of other people died as a result of that.

Have you ever noticed when complaining starts what pronouns are used? Instead of speaking in terms of an issue or a problem that "we" need to address, it is usually "him" or "her," and "I." In marriage situations we so often talk about what **she** does or what **he** does, not about what **we** do. In other situations we talk about what "they" did to "me," or what "she" acts like. The negative kind of complaining that Paul was talking about is inherently divisive. It works to promote disunity rather than unity.

C.

Complaining not only denies God's sovereignty and disrupts unity, it also leads to DESTRUCTION OF OUR WITNESS. (II. A. B. C. DESTRUCTION OF OUR WITNESS) That is Paul's message in vv. 15 & 16 in our passage. The desired goal for refraining from complaining is that Christians "**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, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain....**" The crooked and twisted generation is the pagan population of Philippi which calls Caesar "Lord" and which persecutes Christians. In our twisted Western culture society is also moving in the direction of persecuting Christians and perverting moral values.

This week a biological male who recently decided to identify as a female won a national collegiate women's swimming championship. At the same time several educational institutions have fired teachers who refuse to use pronouns that are consistent with the new trans identity of their students. A couple of Sundays ago I told you about a Christian Finnish legislator who is being charged with a crime for explaining the Biblical view on human sexuality. We live in an increasingly twisted generation

In the midst of such a culture Christians are to prove themselves blameless and innocent. The word "blameless" has to do with the judgment of other people. The word "innocent" has to do with the judgment of God. "Innocence" has to do with inner character, whereas "blamelessness" relates to the outward behavior of that character.

Paul is not talking about sinless perfection. We Christians will not be rid of our sin nature until we get to heaven. But we can reach the point of having a godly lifestyle and character such that unbelievers can find less about us to criticize.

Daniel in the Old Testament had that kind of character. When his fellow rulers became jealous of Daniel's authority in the administration of King Darius, they tried to find some ground of accusation against him. Though he had been in government service for many years, the text says that these other rulers could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption in him. The only thing that they could complain about and criticize was his religion. If people are going to get us on something, let it be that.

In Greek mythology there was a god by the name of Momus. Momus was a lazy god. The only thing that he spent his time doing was finding fault with everybody and everything. Eventually Zeus kicked Momus out of heaven for his whining and complaining. Momus had a group of followers called Momi who did the same thing. The Greek word that Paul used for "without blemish," or "without fault," in v. 15 is *amoma* (MOMUS-AMOMA), which comes from the name of that Greek god. It is as if Paul is saying, "Develop the kind of character that even Moma couldn't find fault with." Don't be like Momus.

With this kind of positive character in a "**crooked and twisted generation,**" Paul says, "**you [Christians] shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life...**"--- that is, the message of the gospel. The benefit of living in a culture that is ungodly is that people with character become more noticeable. One thing that distinguishes people with godly character is that they are not complainers and disputers. They are people who have an inner contentment that is not dependent upon their circumstances.

Paul adds in the rest of v. 16 that he also hopes to see this kind of godly character developed in the Philippians so that when Christ returns and final judgments are made, he will be able to know that his involvement with them was worth the time and effort that he spent.

Grumbling and complaining are typical behaviors of people in the world around us. We Christians ought to be different. Imagine the different response that Paul and Silas would have received if they had been complainers: "Well, Paul, you really blew it this time, didn't you? I hope that you learned your lesson and that next time you will think ahead a little more before you cast demons out of a slave girl. Now look at the mess we are in. We're bleeding, we're chained to the wall, we're surrounded by the dregs of humanity. The food stinks. It's damp and cold here. How are we ever going to get out of this mess."

"Oh yeah, Silas? I didn't hear you yelling very loud to tell those magistrates that we were Roman citizens. And why do you always have to wait for me to take the lead on everything? Doesn't your mouth work." What kind of impact would that attitude have had on their fellow prisoners? Not much. That is what they would have expected. Instead the Book of Acts tells us, "**Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to**

God.” As a result of their godly behavior and lack of complaining combined with an earthquake that happened the same night, people came to faith in Christ.

Imagine that you were down at the local Ford dealership, and a salesman was trying to sell you a Ford Mustang. As he was going through his sales pitch, his wife called. You are standing there and can't help but overhear part of the conversation. Apparently the wife's car is having problems. And you hear the salesman complain, "That lousy Mustang. You can never depend on the darn thing." How might that affect your attitude toward the purchase of a Ford Mustang?

The product that we Christians are representing is Jesus Christ. The most distinctive sales tool that we have is a consistent life. We Christians are not perfect. Our churches are not perfect. But our behavior and attitude ought to be different from that of the ungodly culture around us.

There are many injustices that we encounter in life. But the Bible says that there are proper and improper ways to deal with them. A proper response may involve private confrontation. It may mean prayer. It may mean voicing our opinion in an appropriate forum. But it should not mean complaining and grumbling, because the kind of complaining that Paul was talking about denies the sovereignty of God, disrupts the unity among Christians, and destroys our witness to unbelievers. If instead we focus upon and depend upon the Lord Jesus Christ, who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself and became obedient, even to the point of death on cross, and if we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, God will develop a contentment within us that shows itself by the absence of complaining.