The Price We Pay When We Complain
These three steps can help keep our complaints constructive
By Joseph Stowell

Talking with a Christian doctor about his family, I learned that all of his children were grown, happily committed to Christ, and serving in their local churches. The doctor was obviously grateful and relieved that his children had grown in the faith. As a father of three, I was intensely interested in knowing what he thought was the secret to the spiritual maturity of his children.

He told me, "My wife and I covenanted that our children would never hear us complain or criticize the church, church leaders, or another brother or sister in Christ."

In essence, he had made a commitment not to murmur.

Murmuring is a form of complaining that harbors a negative attitude toward a situation or the people involved. It runs the continuum from griping about the slow driver in front of you to murmuring against the Lord for things He has permitted to come into your life. The common factor in all murmuring is a critical spirit. This kind of grumbling carries the potential for great damage and is a direct violation of God's will.

My doctor friend wisely realized that complaining about God's work or God's people was a direct reflection on the value of God and His plan. What children would want to commit their lives to a church that is the constant object of their parents' complaints? Wise parents teach and model principles of love and prayerful intercession in regard to imperfections around them. Hearing murmuring about the family of God only gives a young child excuses for future rebellion.

Nowhere in Scripture is murmuring more graphically depicted than in the case of the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. When they arrive on the outskirts, twelve spies were sent to "case out" the territory. Ten spies returned with a negative report about what they had seen: "We are not able to go up against the
people, for they are too strong for us. . . .
The land through which we have gone, in
spying it out, is a land that devours its
inhabitants; and all the people whom we
saw in it are men of great size. . . . We
became like grasshoppers in our own sight,
and so we were in their sight" (Numbers
13:31-33). Joshua and Caleb, the other two
spies, had seen the same things. However,
they advised moving forward because they
had faith that God was able to deliver them.

Several aspects of this story are instructive:

Murmuring ignores God's potential. The report of the ten spies reflected a
godless perspective. God had opened the
sea to save them, the heavens to feed them,
and the rocks to provide water for them.
He had defeated mighty armies throughout
their wilderness trek. He had freed them
from perhaps the most powerful nation on
the planet. Certainly He could deal with any
problems the new land might present.
Murmuring is born in the context of bad
report. Sins of the tongue that spread
negative reports (beguilement, gossip,
slander, false witness) create an
environment in which murmuring can
thrive. Some people are always eager to hear
negative things so they can have something
to complain about.

A murmuring spirit is quick to jump
to the wrong conclusion. The grumbling
Israelites blamed God for their situation
and even started planning to return to
Egypt (14:3)! Actually, God was as much in
control as He had ever been. But once
godless grumbling begins to spread, wrong
conclusions are easily reached. Murmuring
and beguilement go hand in hand.

Bad judgments are spawned in the
atmosphere of murmuring. The murmuring
Israelites decided it would have been better
to have died in Egypt. In their haste to
return, they even attempted to stone the
ones urging them to stop grumbling and
trust in the Lord (14:10). Murmuring
distorts good judgment.

Murmuring leads to self-pity. "Would
that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or
would that we had died in this wilderness!"
(v. 2). Murmurers often feel sorry for
themselves and focus on how they have
been mistreated, misused, and let down.

Murmuring thrives in an atmosphere
of fear. Twice Joshua and Caleb exhorted
the people not to be afraid (v. 9). But the
Israelites' fear of the unknown fanned the
sparks of grumbling in their midst. They
were in a situation beyond their control, and
they felt threatened and insecure. Their
faith disappeared as their fear increased.

Murmuring left unchecked usually
breeds rebellion. Joshua and Caleb urged
the murmuring Israelites not to "rebel
against the Lord" (v. 9). But rather than
listen to reason, the Israelites were ready to
elect new leaders who would oversee their
rebellious plans.

The end result of a murmuring spirit
is a general atmosphere of dissatisfaction.
Criticism and complaining lead to discontent. By the end of this episode, Israel was dissatisfied with their God-given lot in life. "Majority reports" are not always trustworthy. Just because a lot of people are murmuring doesn't necessarily mean they are right. But we tend to wear fear and insecurity close to the surface, so murmuring has no trouble attracting a crowd.

God's judgment on the Israelites was swift and final. Their murmuring had verbally defamed His presence, power, wisdom, and glory. They would not see the Promised Land, and they would be granted their misguided wish to die in the wilderness.

The New Testament describes other situations that involved murmuring. The Pharisees murmured because of ignorance and lack of information (John 6:41-43). When the early church didn't adequately meet the needs of Greek widows, the Grecians murmured in the congregation (Acts 6:1). After Paul reminds us that "it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13), he then challenges us to, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing" (2:14). The presence of God and His power in us is a sufficient resource to help us cope with problems without murmuring.

Murmuring is always a godless pastime. It's a habit that thwarts our potential in God. It refuses to believe that God can conquer any problem or condition. And it refuses to recognize that God may use negative circumstances to accomplish His best in our lives and demonstrate His glory.

Is it ever right to express dissatisfaction? Certainly, as long as our attitudes remain grounded in the belief that God is in control and can intervene or not as He so desires. Three steps help to keep our complaints constructive:

#1 - Pray. The psalmist often complained to God about his problems. However, he never lost confidence in God's faithfulness, power, and love. In praying we should commit our problems to God's care and willingly wait for Him to direct us to His solution.

#2 - Take your complaints to someone with the authority to rectify the situation. Sharing problems with those who are not a part of the solution only stimulates murmuring and makes resolution more difficult. Assure the person in authority of your loyalty and desire to help. Open your mind to his or her perspective.

#3 - Direct others to sources of help. When people come to you with problems, encourage them to go to someone in authority before discussing their situations with you any further. While it never hurts to be a good listener, many times others are looking for allies in their murmuring. Don't get caught in the middle of a conflict if you have no opportunity to bring the disagreement to an end.

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Funnies

Lady: “Doc, I’m thinking about buying this horse, and I want your opinion, before I finalize the deal. Will I be able to race him?”

Vet: “There is no doubt about it that you will be able to race him. And I can almost guarantee that you will win.”

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Judge: “You can let me try your case, or be tried by a jury of your peers.”

Suspect: “What do you mean ‘peers’?”

Judge: “Peers are men of your own kind, your equals.”

Suspect: “Well, I sure don’t want to be tried by no cattle thieves.”

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City Slicker: “This will be the first time I ever got on a horse.”

Wrangler: “Do you want an English or Western saddle?”

City Slicker: “What’s the difference?”

Wrangler: “Well, the English saddle is flat, while the Western saddle has a horn in the front.”

City Slicker: “Better give me the English saddle. I don’t expect to be riding in traffic.”

John: “Renting this boat was a great idea; the fish are really biting. Let’s mark this spot so we can come back tomorrow.”

Jim: “I already did. See this “X” I drew on the side of the boat?”

John: “What were you thinking? Did it not occur to you that we might not get the same boat tomorrow!?”

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Farmer Brown: “My cows are all the forecast I need. If they’re lying down, it’s going to be clear. If they are on their feet and restless, it’s likely to rain.”

Hired hand: “How do you figure that when some of your cows are lying down and some are standing up?”

Farmer Brown: “That’s easy, lad. That simply means that it may rain, or it may not.

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“No, you’re not out of season, but lucky for you, I’ve already bagged my limit”