

Teaching Series // February 2021

Road Rage: How Ingratitude Steals Our Joy and Makes Our Lives Miserable

How could an eleven-day journey turn into a disastrous forty-year trek in the wilderness? In a word, ingratitude! Granted, those familiar with the story of the children of Israel are aware it was a lack of trust—unbelief—which doomed them to wander in the desert for an entire generation. But fear and discouragement, and the unbelief that produced them didn't arise without a context or back story. And this is what makes it all so sad as well as instructive. The children of Israel had witnessed with their very own eyes the miraculous deliverance of God. They had seen the stranglehold of their slavery broken by a series of plagues, many of which thoroughly discredited the pagan gods of Egypt. They had been led out of Egypt by a visible pillar of fire at night and a cloud by day (Exodus 13:21). They had seen the destruction of Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea (Exodus 14:30, 31). And how did the people respond? They sang a song of worship and started grumbling (Exodus 15:1-16:12).

Yes, you read that last sentence correctly! Scripture tells us weeping endures for a night, but joy comes in the morning. In the case of God's chosen people, however, perhaps we should say that worship endures for a night and grumbling comes in the morning! But before we shake our heads in disgust and amazement at how quickly these ancient Israelites pivoted from praise to self-pity, just consider the number of times we ourselves have failed to navigate the difficult circumstances of life in the light of God's grace. Don't many of us, just like these ancient people, all too easily lapse into patterns of thinking in which we convince ourselves we are victims, that God has forgotten us, or that life with God is more demanding than life without Him? Don't we, through our petty grievances and endless complaints, reveal an underlying "heart disease"—an ingratitude unbecoming of people who owe their very lives to God?

Bear in mind, after their initial fits over bitter water and lack of food (Exodus 15:22-16:21), these recently rescued Israelites experienced additional manifestations of God's presence—manifestations which should have left no shadow of a doubt that He was with them in that desert. Just think about it. In an epiphany of fire and smoke, the audible voice of God at Mount Sinai was so overwhelming the people essentially asked Moses to take a message for them! And he did. This is the place they became a newly-formed nation and where they received from God their own "constitution"—the covenant God made with them, which included the Ten Commandments. This is where, through Moses, they were reminded of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and how centuries earlier God had promised those patriarchs both descendants and land—the very land to which God was now leading them!

All this rich history of God's faithfulness; and again, how do the people respond? They grumble and complain and whine and rebel and challenge their leaders. In one ugly scene of ingratitude after another, people who had received stunning visible manifestations of God's saving work on their behalf managed to conclusively prove to the world once and for all that seeing is *not* believing! If it were, the children of Israel would have trekked over the desert dunes right on into the Promised Land. But they didn't.

When you think about it, the question never really has been about material or visible manifestations as necessary conditions for belief. If it were, the incarnation alone—God becoming man—would have converted the world! Moreover, those of us who have put our trust in Jesus know from our own experience, even though God *has* graciously come down and revealed Himself in the person of His Son, taking our sin and setting us free, our prayers often betray a heart that wants to "bring Him down" again and again for no other purpose than to make Him the servant of our fleshly desires and appetites. In fact,

with every fit of rage over something we have to endure, do without, or suffer, we send a not-so-subtle signal that God owes us something beyond what He has already done for us. With every setback that puts us in a sullen, self-pitying mood, we demonstrate by our attitude that we think we deserve better treatment from God! With every murmur of discontentment, we are stomping our feet and saying, “God, make my life a bowl of cherries without the pits and I will trust You” (as if we, finite, fallen human beings can effectively set the terms and conditions for belief)!

Yes, far too many of us have grumbled and complained even while entertaining thoughts such as, “if God just instantly healed my mother,” or “if He made it snow in July,” or “if He wrote my name in the sky” my faith would be so much stronger. Would it though? Can we honestly say, without an ounce of irony or hubris, that if we received the same visible manifestations of God’s presence the ancient Israelites did, we would have exhibited more gratitude? Really? Do you think our lives—enriched by much more revelation from God than existed in Moses’ time—bear this out?

All these former things were recorded for our example (1 Corinthians 10:1-12). So maybe the next time we find ourselves harboring a spirit of ingratitude, resentment, or bitterness toward God because He hasn’t come to our aid and unburdened us from trials we think we don’t deserve, we should take stock of just how blessed we truly are! After all, ingratitude does not become us!

In the next few weeks, we are going to study the wilderness wanderings of God’s people recorded in the book of Numbers, chapters 11-20. We are calling this series *Road Rage: How Ingratitude Steals Our Joy and Makes Our Lives Miserable*, but we should probably lengthen the title to say, *How Ingratitude Steals Our Joy and Makes Our Lives and the Lives of Those Around Us Miserable! Why?* Because it is true. Simply put, ingratitude is ugly and unattractive. Who wants to be around people who moan and groan and pout and always want to see themselves as victims? But ingratitude isn’t just ugly. It is dangerous. It is dangerous because, ugly though it may be, it is also very contagious. Just look at the stories of the spies’ report (Numbers 13, 14) and of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16). But even with this, we are not at the real essence of the problem of ingratitude.

Paul tells us in Romans 1:21 that a refusal to acknowledge God, to honor Him, and to give Him thanks is the very fountainhead of futile speculations and a foolish, darkened heart. This, as the context shows, is followed by a whole catalogue of sins (Romans 1:22-32). While we won’t be specifically studying the passage in Romans, this is exactly what we find at the very end of the wilderness wandering as the Israelites are in Moab, right on the cusp of entering Canaan (Numbers 25:1-5). Here the Israelite men engage in sexual immorality and idolatry with Midianite women. One can only wonder if this horrible betrayal of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, could even have occurred if God’s people had been worshipping rather than grumbling with road rage and ingratitude all along the way!

February 7 / Food Fits: When Bread Just Isn’t Enough! / Numbers 11:1-6

Give us this day our daily bread, but throw in a filet mignon while You are at it! According to Deuteronomy 8:3, it was God Himself who allowed His people to become hungry and who then fed them with manna as part of a test. Sadly, they failed the test. The only way to ace the test was to trust, but this was an occasion of murmuring. Manna just wasn’t enough. Some 1,500 years later, Jesus described Himself to the multitudes as the Bread of Life that has come down from heaven...and the murmuring just kept on going (John 6:41)! Perhaps we might expect the Jewish leaders and authorities to grumble or murmur. Jesus was

a threat to their hegemonic interpretations of the Law. But even His own followers, some of His own disciples, grumbled about what He was teaching (John 6:61). And what was He teaching? He Himself is the only entree on the menu that matters. Consume Jesus and you will have life. Period. To order a side dish is disbelief! Jesus is all we need.

February 14 / *Grasshoppers vs the Giants* / Numbers 13:17-14:3

If you love sports as I do, you have no doubt seen at least a game or two where the decisive underdogs trounce their highly favored opponents. There is something so gratifying about this (unless, of course the highly favored opponents are your home team)! In Numbers 13, scouts for team Grasshopper went to assess the strength of the Giants' team. And what did they find? To the dismay of the majority of scouts for team Grasshopper, the Giants were unbeatable. In their opinion, there would be no upset because there would be no game. They would forfeit!

This was not a game, though. It was a battle, and above all else it was a spiritual battle. You see, the giants living in Canaan had been given four centuries to clean up their act and set their team in order. Stop the child sacrifices, the orgies, the violence, the idolatry, the inhumanity, the cruelty. You may not have the law of God on tablets, but for heaven's sake, at the very least listen to your conscience! But the evil and wickedness were ingrained—so deeply ingrained it carried nothing but a death sentence, a sentence the Grasshoppers were supposed to deliver at the command of God. However (to depart from our team metaphor), the murmuring Israelites almost unanimously said, “No. We won't go. We won't fight against this evil. We would prefer the slavery of our former life in Egypt to the task of attempting to dislodge the Canaanites in order to live in the land God promised us.” Weeping and wailing, they gave up without a fight. Well, almost! After missing the opportunity God gave them, they insisted on going to fight on their own terms. Never a good idea! Final score: Giants 100, Grasshoppers 0.

Do you ever wonder what we ourselves forfeit when we fail to trust God? He has promised to be with us in all of our battles. In fact, the battle belongs to the Lord. Let's not forget this. For when we do, we cower rather than conquer in the presence of evil.

February 21 / *Sedition in the Camp* / Numbers 16

Every person who aspires to any position of leadership for any length of time should be required to read the sixteenth chapter of Numbers. Why? Because it is not a matter of if, but rather when someone will come along and challenge your authority to lead. It may not be an open challenge as it was with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram against Moses and Aaron. Indeed, it may be a very subtle, circuitous, gossipy attempt to undermine your authority. But it will be a challenge nevertheless.

And when are these challenges most likely to arise? Almost never when things are going well, and almost always when authority must be asserted. Israel had just suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Amalekites and Canaanites. And because the ill-advised foray into the Promised Land didn't end well, morale had to be at an all-time low. It didn't seem to matter that Moses had instructed the people not to make this attempt to go to battle without God (Numbers 14:41-44). The envious seditionists saw their opportunity to seize on the emotions of disappointment among the people to lodge their challenge against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:14). It was perfect timing!

What is so remarkable about the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, however, is not the timing of their sedition, but the number of people who joined in with them! How did this tsunami of sedition gain so much

speed so quickly? And why were there so many prominent men in the rebellious coalition (Numbers 16:2)? Could it be that seeds of sedition are always lurking in our hearts and ready to sprout whenever our pride and egos are not sufficiently massaged, and when our prominence is not properly acknowledged? One would be hard pressed to think of many other possibilities for the groundswell of such resentments.

Authority and the hierarchy that goes with it have fallen on hard times of late. The spirit of the day is egalitarianism—in the home, in the church, in the classroom, in the workplace—virtually everywhere. Is this a good thing? It depends. For the priesthood in Moses' day, it was disastrous. There could be only one High Priest. The problem with the egalitarian impulse, though, is that once it is unleashed, it is never satisfied with anything less than absolute parity everywhere. (The fact that Korah was a Levite—just a Levite—galled him [Numbers 16:8-10]). But perfect parity, like perfect justice, is not possible in this life. Perfect parity is not even possible in the next life, for Jesus Himself is going to deliver the kingdom up to His Father in perfect submission (1 Corinthians 15:28). C. S. Lewis once said, commenting on the speech of Ulysses in Shakespeare's *Troilus*, "The modern idea that we can choose between hierarchy and equality is, for Shakespeare's Ulysses, mere moonshine. The real alternative is tyranny; if you will not have authority you will find yourself obeying brute force."

Today it is not authority itself that is so repugnant to post-modern people, but *moral* authority. God's Word about the home, the family, the church, the law, the government is anathema to those who do not want God's rule. So how do we as the church operate in this milieu? We model respect for authority and lovingly show how we thrive and flourish with joy in submission, just like our Savior!

February 28 / Leadership Road Rage / Numbers 20:1-13

When you try to understand the chronology of the wilderness wanderings, you are immediately struck by the observation that most of this forty-year period is not captured in the narrative of our Bibles. In fact, aside from a few of the early events of grumbling and murmuring recorded in Exodus and Numbers (including the disastrous rebellion and failed first attempt at coming into the Promised Land found in Numbers 13 and 14) and the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16, 17), it's like God says, "Enough of this!" and puts His finger on the fast-forward button, taking us all the way to the end of this miserable period of Israel's history!

For example, when we compare Numbers 33:38 (Aaron's death, recorded as happening in the fortieth year) with Numbers 20:28 (where it is also recorded), we can surmise that the events of Numbers chapter 20 are somewhere in the neighborhood of the fortieth year since the children of Israel came out of Egypt! What does this mean? It means we get to see history repeat itself (sort of) without a number of other unsavory experiences sandwiched in between. Why do we say history repeats itself? Because Israel is now back where they started forty years earlier—at Kadesh, the site of their original sin. (Some scholars even believe Israel never completely left Kadesh, but rather used it more like a base from which to make periodical trips through the wilderness during the forty-year period.)

But now here they are, mainly the sons and daughters of those disobedient and distrusting parents who have now perished without seeing the Promised Land. Miriam, the sister of Moses, dies and is buried. And then what happens? Like parents, like children. A chorus of moans and complaints arise. Echoes of Exodus 17:1-7 ring out. "We have no water! If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord" (Numbers 20:3). What are they saying? It would have been better to die under God's judgment than to be where they are now, this close to the Promised Land? How could they say such a thing?

And how does Moses respond? Meek Moses loses it! Wouldn't you? After all the grief he has taken over the last forty years, doesn't he deserve to let off some steam? No! There is never such a thing as justification for disobeying the Lord. The Lord told Moses to speak to the rock before the eyes of the assembled congregation, not to strike it—much less add a vitriolic speech with his actions. Yes, the repetition of their parents' grumbling must have been exasperating to Moses, but many of these grown-up children had not had the benefit of experiencing first hand all the things the Lord had so graciously shown their parents. This is why Moses will give these grown-up children a second exposition of the Law (Deuteronomy: deuter = second, nomos = law).

Our hearts go out to Moses because we've been in the very same place he was. Not in the desert striking a rock, but wishing we could rewind our lives and eliminate a sin that carried with it ongoing consequences. Was Moses forgiven? Yes, of course. He appears on the Mount of Transfiguration in the New Testament. Did his punishment fit the crime? God's punishments always fit the crime! And herein all of us who lead at any level—parents, pastors, politicians, teachers, mentors—must pay close attention. Leadership carries with it great responsibility, but nowhere is it so great as when we are representing the Lord before others (Numbers 20:12). We as leaders often underestimate the powerful impressions we make on those who follow us. Unlike Moses, we are not operating under a theocracy, taking direct orders from God and mediating them to others. We gratefully live and lead under the lordship of Jesus Christ and, like Moses, need to be mindful how important it is to uphold God's holiness.