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1

REPLACE A COMPLAINING ATTITUDE . . .

NUMBERS 11:1–3

SAY IT IN A SENTENCE:

Complaining is an attitude choice that if left unchecked will wither my capacity to experience joy and genuine thankfulness.

I hope you aren't one of those people who starts reading the first chapter of a book without reading the introduction, because if you are, things are going to get messed up really bad. In my writing, the introduction is far more than a "Hi, how are ya?"; it's the foundation for all the life-transforming truth to follow. If the foundation is strong, we can build some pretty phenomenal life-changing truth together. If it isn't . . . well, I think you get the picture. So circle back to the introduction if you need to, and I'll wait right here for you . . .

Welcome back. Now that everyone has read the introduction, we know where we are going and how we intend to get there.

Are you upset that I asked you to circle back and read the introduction? Did you complain about that invasion of your freedom, thinking, “I should be able to read as I please?” If not, you are in the minority, because we all complain far more than we like to admit. Wilderness attitude number one is *complaining*. When we express resentment over circumstances that are beyond our control and about which we are doing nothing, we are complaining. God hears it, hates it, and pushes everyone who persists in it toward the wilderness. Remember that those who choose complaining as their lifestyle will spend their lifetime in the wilderness.

Have you ever wondered why complaining is such a battle when we all agree that complaining changes nothing? The reason is that complaining satisfies our sinful natures. Complaining releases negative emotional energy in a way that provides momentary relief from a situation or circumstance that may be frustrating to us. That is why we find it so hard to resist.

Let me be the first to say that in certain situations I really like complaining. In fact, I like it so much that I would never consider eliminating my complaining were it not for what I have learned about how destructive it really is. What we desperately need to learn is how God judges our complaining with emotional fallout that makes our lives like **“a dry and weary land where there is no water”** (Psalm 63:1). Remember the theme of this book:

**“Those who choose murmuring as their lifestyle
will spend their lifetimes in the wilderness.”**

That is certainly true in the area of complaining. If you find it hard to believe that God would “make such a big deal” about your complaining, take a moment and come with me to an often-neglected passage in God’s Word, Numbers 11:1–3. Note carefully Moses’ “journal entry” from one day in the wilderness with his people: **“Now the people became like those who complain . . . and when the Lord heard it, His**

anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them, and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp”(Numbers 11:1).

So here’s this group of people standing somewhere on the edge of their makeshift city, and they are whining and grumbling about something. Maybe it was Moses’ leadership style, or maybe it was the food, or the weather, or a very draining, difficult person. Whatever the subject matter, it was the final straw for God, and He sent fire among the whole group. If that doesn’t tell you how God feels about complaining, nothing will. Now before you try to dismiss that as “Old Testament,” review 1 Corinthians 10:11, which we covered in the introduction. (You did read that, didn’t you?) Remember that what happened to the Israelites was intended by an almighty, unchanging God as an example for us; so let’s make sure we don’t miss it!

Looking a little closer at Numbers 11:1, it’s hard to miss the fact that we choose our attitudes. That’s a short sentence and you might be speed-reading, so let me say it again:

We choose our attitudes!

Oh, yes, we do! They don’t choose us; we choose them. You should see the looks I get when I teach this truth publicly. People get all uptight and angry looking, like they’re going to storm the platform, and I understand why. Nobody wants to be told “Your attitude problem is in the mirror”—but it is. Until we embrace as fact the idea that we choose our attitudes, we will never be able to choose differently, and life will always be a like a wilderness.

Notice what Numbers 11:1 says: *the people!* They couldn’t point the finger anywhere but at themselves. Wouldn’t that be great if we could say, “Well, it’s my mom’s attitude I’ve got,” or “It’s my dad’s fault I’m this way.” “It’s my boss.” “It’s my neighbor.” “It’s my circumstances.” Sound familiar? Back to God’s Word: **“The people become like those who complain.”** Why did they become like that? Because they had to? Because someone forced them, because of the

way they were brought up? No; they chose. They had good reasons not to complain; they had more than enough reasons to be thankful. Instead, they chose the attitude of complaining.

God's final judgment on their attitudes clearly held them accountable for their choosing. Later twelve spies went into the land; twelve spies came back. Two spies chose God and faith and a good attitude—and they got the Promised Land. Ten spies chose self and doubt and a bad attitude—they got the wilderness. The people listened to the majority report and the minority report, and then they chose. They voted with their attitude—and they got the wilderness. We choose our attitudes.

I recently received a letter from a man who wrote multiple pages of eloquent persuasion trying to convince me that we don't choose our attitudes, and therefore we're not responsible for them. He wanted to blame circumstances and other people and a host of secondary influences, all of which may play a part, but do not control us. We are the ones in control, and we do choose our attitudes.

At this point, you may be asking, "What exactly do you mean by attitude?" Let's get a definition stated right now, because if we're going to be talking about attitudes for ten chapters, we should all be on the same page.

Attitudes are patterns of thinking.

That's the first thing. Attitudes are patterns of thinking. You develop a way of thinking about things—a way of approaching life. Every single person, including you, has patterns of thinking; a way that you think about life. It goes back to the time when you were very young.

Imagine for a moment that you and I are observing a toddler who is holding a large, red, rubber ball. Before we can ask any questions, the child speaks.

"What are you looking at? It's my ball. It's not your ball." Wow, what an attitude!

Now that attitude may be influenced by his parents, or the fact that he needs a rest, or a cookie, or whatever, but still he is choosing.

We continue watching that two-year-old and his red ball as he tosses it up in the air and catches it. All of sudden, right in the middle of his nice playtime, he drops the ball, and everyone freezes to see what will happen next. Will he be upset about the fact that he dropped the ball? Will he get angry because he liked it a lot better in his hands than on the ground? We hold our breath and wait to see what attitude he will choose. Over the next few years, he will “drop many balls,” and each time he will choose his attitude. Over time, his whole view of life will be shaped by a pattern of thinking—the attitude—he establishes. He has many attitudes to choose from.

- 1.** He could choose to say: “Dumb ball! Who made this cheap, lousy, dime-store ball anyway? It’s so slippery!”
- 2.** He could choose to say: “Where’s my parents? I can’t believe they’re not here when I dropped this ball! What kind of parents are they? If they really loved me, they would be here to help me pick up this ball!”
- 3.** He could choose to say: “I’m such a loser. I always drop balls. I’ve played with other kids. They don’t drop balls all the time. I’m the only one who drops balls! What’s wrong with me? I’m such a loser!”
- 4.** Or he could choose to say: “It’s my fault. I dropped the ball. People drop balls all the time. I’m going to have a positive attitude. I’m going to pick it up and I’m going to go on. Maybe I can grow through this somehow, and stop dropping balls as often as I do now.”

These little speeches sound familiar, don’t they? But rather than from the mouths of toddlers, too often they come from our mouths, and betray a negative pattern of thinking—an attitude. In fact, they

may reflect the way you think most of the time, because we all drop balls, don't we? The key to happiness is in the attitude we choose when we do "drop a ball." Attitudes are patterns of thinking. But here's the second part of the definition:

**Attitudes are patterns of thinking
formed over a long period of time.**

Our attitudes are patterns of thinking—get this now—formed over a long period of time. Trace the career of the children of Israel, and you will know they didn't suddenly become complainers in Numbers 11. Go back to the days when they were making bricks in Egypt. They were constantly whining and sniveling about everything. You say, "Well, their lives were hard." Yes, their lives were hard, but some of them chose complaining and resentment toward God, and others in the exact same circumstances chose thankfulness instead. My point is this: Attitudes are patterns of thinking formed over a long period of time. Wrong attitudes are hard to change because they are habitual, harmful ways of thinking about life and circumstances.

Patterns of thinking are so deeply ingrained in our hearts that we hardly even notice them. We get so used to reacting a certain way that our choices become automatic, and in time we cease to see them as actual choices. We feel like we are trapped, but we are not. *Tragically, the consequences are also automatic*, and that is the cycle that we are trying to break in this book.

CHOOSING YOUR ATTITUDES

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" are not as far away as you might think. Did you know that the whole generation died just a few miles from the land flowing with milk and honey? Do you know why they died without

stepping into the Promised Land? They died because they grumbled against God and rejected the call to enter the land. (See Numbers 14:1–4, 22–35, especially verse 29.)

They were so close to the joy of Promised Land living. Like them, you and I are much closer than we think to dramatic, joy-producing life change. Like them, you can make a choice to reject complaining and to trust God. Like them, the barrier is your patterns of thinking—and those patterns can change. Yes, they can!

And you can take the first step when you are willing to say, “I choose my attitudes.” You can’t change an attitude until you admit you chose it. But if you are willing to say, “I choose my attitude,” then a different choice becomes your option. By admitting you made the choice, you put yourself in a position to make a different choice next time.

Perhaps you’re not quite there yet. You want to read more before you accept responsibility for your attitudes. If that is your case, I encourage you to say this by faith: “I choose my attitudes. Lord, show me this is true.” Pray that out loud. It’s a prayer I’m confident God will answer, because He wants you out of the wilderness even more than you do. He wants to give you the fullness of Promised Land living, and He will as you allow Him to change your negative attitudes.

THE TRUTH ABOUT COMPLAINING

OK, back to the specific attitude of *complaining*. Here is one basic truth about complaining we cannot ignore:

Complaining is a sin.

Yes, it is. Complaining is a sin. The word *sin* literally means “missing the mark”; “failing in regard to God’s holy standard and just demands.” So equating complaining with sin puts complaints in a dangerous category.

Maybe you're thinking to yourself, "Wait a minute; complaining's not a sin. I mean, it may not be a great thing, but a sin? I mean, stealing and lying and blasphemy—sure (because they're obvious sins), but complaining? I mean . . . who am I hurting? Who am I really hurting when I complain?"

Well, first of all, you're hurting yourself! When you complain, you are choosing a response that does you harm rather than good. Our complaints may lead to anger, bitterness, and even depression. God loves you. He doesn't want you hurting yourself. What hurts you, hurts Him; so complaining hurts you both.

Beyond this, when you complain, you're not just hurting yourself but God indirectly. God is directly affected when He hears our complaining and our wrong attitudes, because complaining questions God's sovereignty! To complain is to say in effect; "God, You blew it! You had a chance to meet my expectations, but You couldn't handle it! Nice try, God, close—but not close enough." So complaining definitely injures you and the Lord.

In addition to that, we hurt the people around us. We affect others with our "stinking thinking." Nobody likes a negatron, or a lifetime member in the cold-water brigade, do they? If your friends and family hear you complaining all the time, you are bringing them down.

"But they do the same thing," you say. OK, then, y'all are bringing each other down. My point is only that complaining hurts far more than just you. It hurts God and those who hear it, and that's not right. So, no doubt about it, complaining is a sin.

DEFINING COMPLAINING

Before we go any further, let's get on the table a clear definition of this sin, so we will know when we are damaging ourselves and others and our relationship with God. Here's a key definition: *Complaining is expressing dissatisfaction with a circumstance that is not wrong and about which I'm doing nothing to correct.*

First of all, complaining is about *things that are not wrong*. If the thing is wrong, and you express dissatisfaction, it's not complaining. It's not a sin to picket an abortion clinic. That's not complaining. It's not a sin to say to my spouse, "We need to spend more time with the children." That's not complaining. Complaining is grumbling about things that aren't wrong. You're dissatisfied with the meal served on a trip and ask the flight attendant to rewarm the food, or later write customer service suggesting they change caterers or offer different options. That's not complaining; that's expressing a legitimate grievance.

Second, complaining involves *things that I'm doing nothing to correct*. I'm choosing to whine about it, but I'm not doing anything to correct the situation. That's complaining. It is complaining to whine about abortion, but never pray or picket or vote or give donations or write leaders. Just do nothing but mumble a lot under your breath, and there it is—you're complaining. It is complaining to talk about your husband's lack of time with the children. It's not complaining when you talk with your husband and together try to reach a constructive solution. It is complaining when you tell a fellow passenger, "This food stinks." It's not complaining when you tell the flight attendant you dislike the beef and politely request a different entrée.

According to our definition, complaining involves *circumstances*. Please note that complaining doesn't involve people. Criticism involves people; complaining involves circumstances. We're going to talk about criticism in chapter 5. Complaining is about circumstances, specific situations that we dislike because of how they affect someone or something we value.

Finally, complaining involves *expressing dissatisfaction*. This gets a little tricky. Some people pride themselves on verbal control. "I never complain," they say. Well, hang on for a minute. Those of us who are extroverts and often find ourselves saying things that we regret would plead with those of you who are introverts to recognize that you're not simply living in victory because you have a piece of duct tape over your mouth. **"Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord**

looks at the heart”(1 Samuel 16:7). So complaining is not just the outbursts of frustration, but it’s also those things that we think. That’s complaining, too. To express dissatisfaction in any way—not just verbally but even in your thoughts—with a circumstance that is not wrong and about which I am doing nothing to correct . . . that’s complaining. In the short term, it separates us from God; in the long term, it becomes a lifestyle, and we spend our lifetime in the wilderness.

HOW COMMON IS THIS PROBLEM?

“Is there a lot of complaining going on?” you may ask. “Are people really complainers?” That’s easy to answer; just open the newspaper to the letters to the editor and read complaint after complaint. Or hang around the water cooler at work to hear employees gripe about the boss’s latest “bad decision.” And then there’s the Internet. The number of web sites dedicated to complaining is amazing.

One Internet site is called Iventing.com. “Welcome to Iventing.com, the free place on the Internet to get it off your chest and complain. Go on. It’s good for you. Do you want to vent right now? Go right ahead! Look at what others are venting about. Write it all down. Give us your name.”

Can you believe that? Here’s another site called The Complaint Station: “The king of complaints. Over five million served. We hold the record for the most complaints on any one site and are the pioneers of open complaining.” To which I must respond, “Get a life!” But they’re not finished: “The purpose of The Complaint Station is to provide you with a central location to file your complaints or research previous complaints. You can complain about issues related to . . . [blah, blah, blah].” How sick is that? Now this next site must have been the first of its kind on the Internet; it has the best name: Complain.org.

Complain about anything. The whole world is here to listen. Complain about your neighbor. Complain about the airlines. Complain about trains. Complain about noise. Complain about your mother-

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in-law. Complain about high prices. About getting ripped off. About potholes. About the police. Complain about welfare. Complain about work. Complain about your boss. Complain to us or even about us. We'll listen and tell everyone. No exceptions!

As I was reading all this to find out how common the problem of complaining is, I began thinking that these people need some serious, long-term counseling. But then I thought, "Well, surely the body of Christ is ahead in this problem." And then I found a Web site that offers an opportunity to "complain about anything here. Everyone needs to vent sometimes."

This site offers Christians a whole section where they can pick things to complain about. Multiple-choice complaining has arrived! I can just hear people reading this list and thinking, "I wasn't even mad about that, but now that I see it—man, that is kind of lame!" The site lists categories like: Complain that Bible college is expensive; complain about people who cuss; complain about my brother who is a pig; complain about your youth pastor . . ."

Is that twisted or what? Tragically, it's things like this that display the spiritual poverty in the church today. As a pastor, I constantly hear people complaining that the joy and peace of the Christian life is somehow eluding them. They feel frustrated that many of the good things Jesus offers are only concepts to them and not personal realities. When I press them for specifics, they report that their lives have, in fact, become like a wilderness! Well, yeeaaahhh!! Exactly! Just like a wilderness. Are we making the connection? Those who choose complaining as their lifestyle will spend their lifetimes in the wilderness. Complaining is sin that makes life like living in a wilderness.

GOD IS LISTENING

Think of it: God heard every word of every complaint of the children of Israel. Notice the text again: **"Now the people became like**

those who complain . . . and . . . the Lord heard it (11:1). The Lord heard it; He was there. The people ignored the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, right there all the time. Those should have been awesome and humbling evidences of God's nearness. Instead, the people took God for granted. This wasn't the first time they had complained. Look at the complaints recorded in Exodus alone:

"Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (14:12)

So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" (15:24)

The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (16:3)

But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (17:3)

Over and over we read it: "And the people complained." And, "Why can't we have more of this . . . and when are we going to get some of that?" And, "Why don't You see that we need . . . ?" And, "Why didn't You let us . . . ?" The chorus of complaints rose constantly: "Can't we know . . . ?" And, "This isn't right!" And, "You should have . . ." So the complaint chorus continued, and worst of all, the clamor created a continuous ringing in the very ears of their Creator. God heard their complaints, and He hears our complaining.

THE WORST KIND OF COMPLAINING

Now, this is an important point. Yes, God hears our complaining about the weather and the traffic and the taxes and the social decline

and our age and whatever else we complain about. God hears all that. But there is one particular kind of complaining that grates most of all on the ears of God. Look at Numbers 11 again; see if you can pick out the worst kind of complaining from verse 1. **“Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord.”** That’s the worst kind of complaining there is. Complaining about adversity. “Why do I have to go through that? Why must I endure all this hassle when life goes so smoothly for them? I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired; when will all this end? Why can’t my life be more like Bill Jones or whatever?”

It’s “My trial. . . . My hardship. . . . My lot in life. . . . My misfortune.” All this nauseating noise rises to the very ears of God until He replies, “Could you get away from Me with that chronic complaining?”

The writer of Hebrews has warned us, **“Do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord. . . . For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines”** (12:5–6). God has entrusted to every person a measure of adversity. You have a measure of adversity, and so do I. Just the right amount to accomplish the eternal purposes of God in our lives. Your measure of adversity is like no one else’s. This is a place in life about which you could say, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.”

For some people, the adversity is a health situation. And for others, it’s a struggling career and continuous job changes. And for others, a family tragedy happened years ago, and now they have to shoulder an incredible weight of responsibility that seems grossly unfair and unbearable. Some made a very poor decision early in life and their marriage fell apart, and now they struggle with blended families and the consequences of those choices. Whatever that measure of adversity is, it’s your “cross” to carry.

I hurt for friends who want desperately to be parents, yet God has not allowed them, up to this point, to have children. Some long to be married, yet God has not provided the right mate. I could go on and on with examples. But hear this: Every one of us has a measure of adversity, and God Himself is the one who measured it out. And for that reason,

every person has something in his or her life that God doesn't want to hear complaints about.

Instead of rejoicing in all the good things that God has done in our lives, we complain about that one thing—whatever it is. You say, “But it’s hard.” I know it’s hard. It’s hard to live with adversity and it’s hard not to complain. But listen to me. Hear this pastor’s heart. You are forfeiting the grace that could help you through that trial by complaining about it. All the grace and strength you need to experience joy and victory is available to you, but by choosing to complain, by clinging to the idol of a perfect life. . .

You are flushing away the grace of God.

As Jonah wrote, **“Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God’s mercies”** (2:8 NLT). Is that your worthless idol, your false god? Do you feel you are entitled to a perfect life, one without adversity? Realize this: That very adversity that you so often complain about is the thing God wants to use to keep your heart close to His. In His grace, He grants adversity to bring us close to Him.

“But it’s so hard,” you say. I understand; I am not making light of your adversity. I’m just trying to point out the connection between a life that feels like living in the wilderness and the attitudes of resentment and complaining that put us there. The bad thing isn’t the adversity; it’s our response to it! It’s our attitude! And God simply will not tolerate repeated complaints about adversity. In fact:

God Hates Our Complaining.

Notice God’s response to those who complained: **“His anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp”** (Numbers 11:1). God’s anger was kindled. Again, this was not an isolated occurrence. The people habitually offended God. Verse 10 reports that **“Moses heard**

the people weeping throughout their families, each man at the doorway of his tent; and the anger of the Lord was kindled greatly.” Why? Because the people were crying? No, because of what they were crying about! They were longing for things that God was not willing to give them. They had complained so long that they completely lost perspective and started melting down about it.

Later in the same chapter we read, **“While the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague”** (verse 33). In subsequent chapters, we see God’s constant response to their complaints: **“So the anger of the Lord burned against them and He departed”** (12:9). **“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the Lord, so that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel’”** (25:4). **“Now behold, you have risen up in your fathers’ place, a brood of sinful men, to add still more to the burning anger of the Lord against Israel”** (32:14).

Now I know what you’re thinking: *Well, that was then. This is now. God doesn’t get angry anymore.* But Psalm 7:11 says that **“God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day.”** Every day! You say, “But God is a God of love.” Yes, He is. And in His infinite transcendence, God can both love us extravagantly and hate our sin passionately at the same time. God can embrace us and forgive us eternally but judge us in the moment because of our attitudes that are not pleasing to Him. This concept may be a bit confusing to us, but it is perfectly clear to the Lord. He loves us and hates sin. Both are true.

NOISE IN THE BASEMENT

Children are such powerful messengers of the relationship we have with our Father in heaven. Often we can gain insight into how our actions affect God by looking at the way children affect us. Now imagine for a moment that you are a parent who is out for the evening

with your spouse. You arrive home quite late. Your oldest—imagine this—has been baby-sitting the younger two while you were out for dinner. As you enter the house, you expect to find them in bed, but they are not!

All the lights in the house are out, and the silence gets eerie as you begin to search for them frantically. You're looking around, checking rooms and calling out their names. Where are they? You walk through the kitchen, and, near the door that leads to the basement, you hear a noise. You stop! Someone is talking in the basement.

So you open the door slowly and step down the stairs. As you get closer, you recognize it's your children's voices, and by the time you reach the bottom of the stairs you've got their location. They are in the laundry room with a flashlight, sitting in a circle. They are obviously engrossed in their conversation because they haven't heard the commotion upstairs.

Of course, you're relieved that they seem fine, but you are also very curious to find out what they're talking about. So you listen in and you hear, "I wish Dad would get a better job. Is he lazy?"

Another child pipes in: "Why can't he take care of us like the Smiths at church or like the Joneses at school? Why can't we have . . . ?"

Another child speaks up: "I'm so sick of Mom's rules: 'Go to school,' and 'Clean up your room.' Who does she think she is!? I'm not gonna take her bossy ways anymore." And you listen as this complaining goes on.

Now as a parent, at first you are hurt. You think, "I have tried so hard. I've done so much. How could it not be enough?" But if I understand parents, the hurt part lasts for about ten seconds. And then you're angry. And you're thinking things like, "The nerve of these kids!" and "It's never enough!" and "The things that I have done for them!" You may say, "These little runts," and "They have no idea the sacrifices that we have made. Maybe we haven't given them everything, but do you know what? We've done our best!"

Now take that out of the context of imperfect parents and think of

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your attitudes in the hearing of our perfect heavenly Father. Then remember that He always listens and hears everything you and I say—yikes, everything! Is it any wonder that God—yes, in our day—still has righteous indignation over the attitudes of His people? God hears our complaining and He hates it! It breaks His heart. It’s a slap to His face. It insults His grace. And He is angry.

WATCH OUT! A HOLY JUDGMENT

In Numbers 11:1 we read that the people’s complaints not only kindled God’s anger, but that **“The fire of the Lord burned among them.”** That phrase “the fire of the Lord” appears five times in Scripture. Along with the phrase “the fire of God,” it describes the all-too-common biblical outpouring of God’s wrath and judgment. His holiness creates a cleansing fire. The results are devastating to those who provoke His judgment. Remember Moses’ shock in Exodus 3. God appeared to Moses the first time in a burning bush. There was a multimedia experience of God’s judgment and holiness. In Numbers 11, that same holy fire began to crackle and kill on the edges of the camp. The people crossed the line of complaining and discovered hot flames on the other side. God has never lost His holiness or diminished in His righteousness.

Even in this day of grace, God’s fire still consumes in judgment. He judges a complaining attitude as surely as He judged the people of Israel in the desert. But, for now, God’s fire doesn’t consume our existence; it scorches our happiness. God’s fire consumes all that is fresh and healthy and life-giving in our lives. And life becomes a wilderness. Those who choose complaining as their lifestyle will spend their lifetimes in the wilderness. Is your life like that? Has life for you become like a wilderness? All dry and dead and cheerless, a wasteland where joy is wilted away because your pattern of thinking formed over a long period of time always sees the negative?

LIKE WANDERERS IN THE DESERT

Not so long ago, my wife and I were at a wedding. We get to go to weddings often and usually enjoy ourselves a lot. At this particular wedding reception, we were seated with a couple that I had heard about previously and whom I was looking forward to meeting. But the enjoyment lasted for about sixty seconds because I suddenly found myself thinking, “Have you ever met such cheerless, joyless believers in your whole life?”

It was sad. And so I sort of took it on as a challenge to cheer them up. (I admit my wife doesn’t really like this about me.) I was telling them a few jokes at the table and trying to lighten things up a little bit. My best stuff fell flat. They didn’t even offer a courtesy chuckle. Wanting to do a little CPR on their sense of humor, I kept at it but made very little progress. They were barely tolerating me, sort of grunting and groaning, like mournful Eeyore the donkey in *Winnie the Pooh*: “Oh, Boooootheeeeerrrr!”

At one point, someone came around and said, “We’re going to take a picture of your table now,” like they do at most weddings. So we stood up with the bride and groom and formed a circle around the “stone family.” They certainly weren’t gonna move, so Kathy and I stood behind them and I thought, “Well, maybe this will break the ice.” So I made these peace signs behind their heads during the photograph.

I could tell right away that they weren’t digging that at all. So I leaned down and said to them, “Boy, I bet it’s been a long time since someone has done that to you.”

The wife looked up and said (in a voice somewhere between Gladys Cravitz on *Bewitched* and Mrs. Howell on *Gilligan’s Island*): “Well, normally we don’t spend so much time with immature people.”

I just thought, “You poor soul! Back into the wilderness you go!”

Do you know something? These are not bad people; these are good people. These are people like you and me who, without realizing it, choose attitudes moment by moment and day after day that eventually

become their lifestyle. Humor was not allowed in their lifestyle. No fun, no kidding or teasing, no relaxing banter between acquaintances, just a dry, joyless, wilderness existence. They had become desert wanderers. I'm getting thirsty just thinking about the life they are living and the attitudes they have chosen.

The stone family didn't want to laugh about wrong things but eventually got to the place where they couldn't laugh at all! Especially not at themselves. That is a sure sign of wilderness living—the inability to laugh at oneself.

Can You Laugh At Yourself?

I've always told my kids: If you can't laugh at yourself, the whole world stinks. That's true. Like the man who fell asleep on the couch in his home, and his playful children put a piece of Limburger cheese on his moustache. When he woke up, he smelled something terribly wrong and ran through the house yelling, "Something in this room stinks! No, something in this house stinks!"

Unable to locate the trouble, he went out on the front porch and yelled at the top of his lungs, "*This whole world stinks!*"

LET'S TALK SOLUTION

Remember that this chapter title is "Replace a Complaining Attitude . . ." Our concern has been to identify the telltale signs of complaining in our lives. Before I hint at the solution, I want to encourage you to continue immediately to the next chapter when you've finished reading this one. There we will put into practice an important spiritual principle: Once you empty something, you must fill it with something else. Jesus gave a chilling warning about the fate of someone who had a demon expelled but didn't fill the house with God's Spirit (Matthew 12:43–45). The demon returned with friends and made the man's life worse than before! When we set out to replace a bad attitude, we need to pray and

then put a good attitude in its place. You can't simply put off bad habits and live in a vacuum; you have to put on good ones in their place.

Now let's look for a moment at solution steps. To do so, we need to ask ourselves some soul-searching questions. Ask yourself:

1. *Am I a complainer?* I challenge you to begin to pray from your heart, "God, am I a complainer?" Complaining is so hard to see in ourselves, especially when it's reached the habit stage. It's easy to see in others. When we complain, we say, "I'm just getting things off my chest." But when other people complain, we're quick to advise, "You're not helping anything." Let me ask you these clarifying questions: What two or three things about your life would you most like to change? Are you complaining about those things verbally or nonverbally? Are you accepting and thankful or resisting and complaining?
2. *Am I reaping the consequences of complaining in my relationship with God? Is that the problem?* Imagine that God whispered into your heart right now, "I'm listening. I'm listening. I hear everything you say. I hear every thought you think—all of it." Would that shed a new light on the landscape of your life? If your life lacks joy and a sense of God's favor and presence . . . if your heart is like a wilderness, it's your attitudes.
3. *Am I willing to repent?* Am I willing to turn from that attitude of complaining, acknowledge its wrongness, and ask God to change my attitude? We've been in the Old Testament for this lesson, but let's highlight the good news with these closing thoughts. That good news we celebrate is the message of Jesus Christ. His death provided a way for us to be forgiven and cleansed and have a fresh start in life and in our attitudes. We need only repent—agree with God that our complaints are sin—and choose to turn from complaining and ask His forgiveness.

I realize the above questions may have made you uncomfortable, but we will need to get over that. If you and I are serious about putting the wilderness behind us, we must get serious about why we're there, and that means answering probing questions at the end of every chapter. Questions like these help us accept responsibility for our attitudes. If you blew off the questions above, please look at them again. And if God reveals complaining as a problem in your life . . . acknowledge it! And then turn from it. Otherwise, expect more wilderness ahead.

In the next chapter I will be talking about the wonderful, positive, life-giving attitude that replaces complaining, but let me take a moment and share a bit of my own struggle in this area.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

On a personal level, complaining has definitely been an issue for me. I'm really thankful to God for a wife who many times has taken me aside and said, "Do you know what? You're not helping anything. Your complaints are not making anything better." Then she'll often say, "We need to stop and pray about this." I complain about incompetence, I complain about traffic and pressure, and weather and moral decline, and . . . I can feel the sinful pattern welling up in me even now as I write to you (better stop, ha, ha).

Countless times in years gone by, Kathy and I have sat together while I pray, "God, I'm sorry for my attitude. It's wrong. I know it's not pleasing to You. Please forgive my complaining attitude and cleanse my heart." The Lord has been so faithful to do that. In fact, I encourage you to take a moment and pray right now.

Look Up

Lord, I thank You for Your Word. I thank You that You have revealed Yourself to me as You truly are. Thank You for directing Your holy, righteous anger at my complaining

LORD, CHANGE MY ATTITUDE

and how that keeps me from You. Thank You, Lord, that You not only love me, but You hate my complaining and the way that it makes my life like a desert.

In this moment, I ask that You would make me very aware of what I say and what I think. Keep the connection strong between how I deal with my circumstances and the joy that I experience. Forgive me for complaining, not just because of how it affects our relationship, but how it affects my relationships with those I love. Give me grace and faith to embrace the trials You allow, knowing what is best for me is always upon Your heart. Please teach me not to complain, and even as I look to this next chapter, teach me to put on the life-giving, joy-producing attitude that goes in its place. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.