

# lesson five

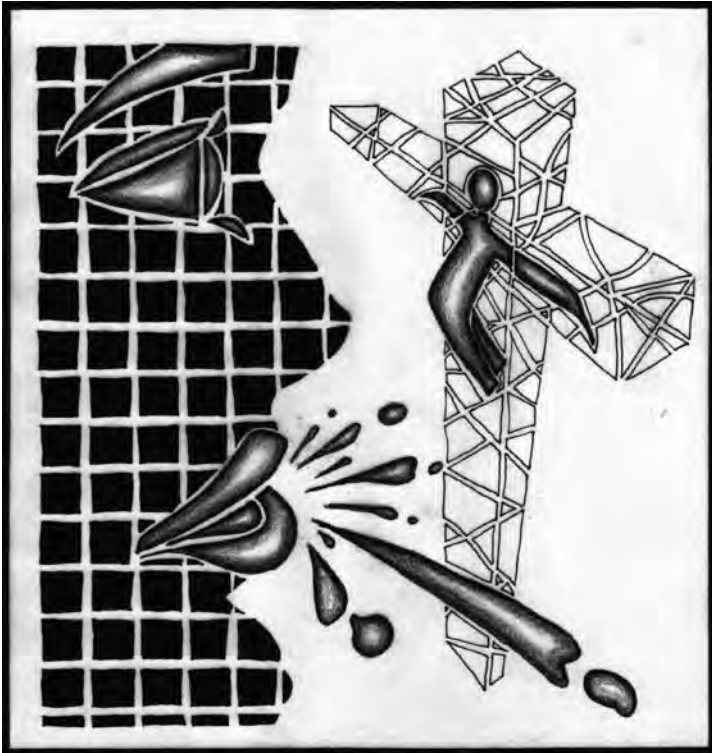
OCTOBER 24–OCTOBER 31

## From Complaints to **Apostasy**

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*“Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world”*

*(Phil. 2:14, 15, NKJV).*



Phil. 2:12–18;  
4:4–7

## Introduction

# The “24-Hour” Bus Ride

To most of us, the mission trip had sounded exciting, adventurous, and even a bit glamorous—jetting across Europe to help build a hospital and run health clinics in Africa—a dream come true for this group of dedicated Christian warriors.

However, no one told us about the “24-hour” bus ride. Well, maybe it wasn’t truly 24 hours; but that’s what it felt like, sitting on top of luggage and each other, sweating in unbearable heat, feeling like sardines in a tropical oven as we covered mile after mile after mile. When would this trip end?

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### The complaints flowed like a rushing river.

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The complaints flowed like a rushing river. “When do we get there?” “Why is it so hot?” “Why did I come on this trip?” Those were some of the words resonating around the bus that transported this westernized group of young people as we traveled on a mission trip from Accra, the capital of Ghana, in the south, to the northern city of Tamale.

However, it finally did end. It ended in an experience of a lifetime—one in which we learned to appreciate the pleasures of life we take for granted and in which we experienced the Holy Spirit working through our ministry. Most important, we learned there are people who, despite having so little, gave thanks to God for what they had.

There are many journeys we’ll all have to take in life, and not all of them will be pleasant. There will often be times when it’s easier to complain bitterly than praise joyously. God, however, urges us to a higher calling. As His followers, He wants us to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4, NKJV), no matter what the circumstances.

We never know where a trip may take us; but if we believe God is in the driver’s seat, we can allow Him to be in total control. Only then will we be able to get through the bad conditions to the blessings waiting for us.

The Israelites who escaped Egypt spent their trip to the Promised Land complaining about the conditions, and for that reason, that generation never saw their inheritance. As you learn about their experiences this week, consider that you have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, to stop complaining, and to enjoy the ride!

Logos  
*A People in Rebellion*

Numbers 11–14

The Israelites had broken camp at Sinai and had started their 11-day journey to Kadesh, not far from the borders of Canaan. At Sinai they had entered into a covenant relationship with God by promising to obey the Ten Commandments (Exod. 19:8). However, Numbers 11–14 chronicles the people doing the exact opposite. These chapters record a people in rebellion against the Almighty God.

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**They chose to look through fearful, faithless eyes.**

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***Dissatisfaction in the Camp (Numbers 11)***

The people were only three days into their march when they began complaining. They were unhappy with the route that was taken and the physical discomfort along the way, despite knowing that they were being led by God, as represented by the cloud ahead of them. They had quickly forgotten that they had arrived thus far by His providence and mercy.

They also began murmuring about manna, the food God was providing. “The Lord became exceedingly angry” (Num. 11:10, NIV) as the people failed to accept the daily provision of food He arranged for them. “Had they been willing to deny appetite, in obedience to His wise restrictions, feebleness and disease would have been unknown to them. . . . But their unwillingness to submit to the restrictions and requirements of God, prevented them, to a great extent, from reaching the high standard which He desired them to attain, and from the blessings which He was ready to bestow upon them.”<sup>1</sup>

***Sibling Rivalry? (Numbers 12)***

In Numbers 11, God had allowed the appointment of 70 elders to share the burden of responsibility when Moses cried out in distress. Moses’ elder siblings, Miriam and Aaron, were not part of this group. They had played integral roles in the formation of the nation and during the Exodus, and in Aaron’s case, continued to do so in the priestly ministry. However, God had placed Moses in a position of authority over them, and he had a special relationship with God. Moses, unlike any other in the camp, was privileged to speak with God face-to-face and see His form (Num. 12:8).

Miriam and Aaron envied Moses and were presumptuous enough to compare themselves to him. In their envy they lashed out at his Cushite wife, speaking of her ancestry with contempt. However, this was more than mere sibling rivalry. Miriam and Aaron were rebelling against God in choosing to speak against His appointed leader. They gave in to a spirit of self-exaltation and considered themselves better than the one through whom God had chosen to work.

## **Our Strength, Our Power (Numbers 13)**

The Israelites were finally on the borders of Canaan. What God had promised was within sight. Once again, however, they suffered from a previously observed malady—collective amnesia. They forgot the astounding miracles God had provided to deliver them from the clutches of Egypt. They forgot their Red Sea experience. They forgot how God had been providing and sustaining them through their wilderness experience; and they forgot that God was the One who would accomplish what He had promised.

It was the peoples' idea to send spies to survey the land, not God's idea.<sup>2</sup> This is a clear indication that they doubted His promises. The nation to whom God had especially revealed Himself and covenanted with did not understand what Balaam, a pagan prophet prophesied, " 'God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?' " (Num. 23:19, NIV).

The first part of the spies' report about the abundance of the land was true; but it was overshadowed by their fear of the powerful people they saw there. They chose to look through fearful, faithless eyes rather than eyes filled with hope and faith that was strengthened by how God had been leading them. Only Joshua and Caleb gave a report prompted by faith in God. Canaan was a gift from God, and by speaking poorly about it, the people were speaking against God and rejecting what He was graciously offering to them. If only they had remembered that the Lord's arm is never too short (Num. 11:23). When human strength and power fail is the perfect occasion for God to lovingly demonstrate His incomparable omnipotence.

## **God's Strength, God's Power (Numbers 14)**

Caleb and Joshua pleaded with the people not to rebel against God (Num. 14:9); but their pleas fell on deaf ears. The people were prepared to stone them. Their attitude was one of contempt toward God. They continued to doubt Him and His power (Num. 14:11).

Their sustained rebellion against God resulted in the sentence of wandering for 40 more years in the wilderness, one year for every day the spies had spent reconnoitering the land. The people mourned this decree. Ellen White states that they mourned the judgment rather than their sins. The command to retreat was God testing their submission to His will.<sup>3</sup> However, the Israelites were steadfast in their rebellion. When God asked them to take the land, they refused and when commanded to retreat they did the exact opposite. The army of Israel was defeated because they failed to realize that God would accomplish what He promised, not by their strength and power, but by strict obedience to His commands.

## **REACT**

1. How might you presently be rebelling against God through your actions or inaction?
2. What changes do you need to make in your journey to the Promised Land?

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1. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 378.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 387.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 391.

Testimony  
“Obedience to God’s  
Will”

Num. 11:4–6

“God brought the Israelites from Egypt, that He might establish them in the land of Canaan, a pure, holy, and happy people. In the accomplishment of this object He subjected them to a course of discipline, both for their own good and for the good of their posterity. Had they been willing to deny appetite, in obedience to His wise restrictions, feebleness and disease would have been unknown among them.”<sup>1</sup>

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**“They desired a flesh diet, and they reaped its results.”**

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“And the mixed multitude that was among them fell a-lusting; and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat?” (Num. 11:4).

“God might as easily have provided them with flesh as with manna, but a restriction was placed upon them for their good. It was His purpose to supply them with food better suited to their wants than the feverish diet to which many had become accustomed in Egypt. The perverted appetite was to be brought into a more healthy state, that they might enjoy the food originally provided for man—the fruits of the earth, which God gave Adam and Eve in Eden.”<sup>2</sup>

“By departing from the plan divinely appointed for their diet, the Israelites suffered great loss. They desired a flesh diet, and they reaped its results. They did not reach God’s ideal of character or fulfill His purpose. The Lord ‘gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.’ Psalm 106:15. They valued the earthly above the spiritual, and the sacred pre-eminence which was His purpose for them they did not attain.”<sup>3</sup>

### **REACT**

1. How does the story of Daniel in Daniel 1:8–20 relate to the lesson discussed today?
2. Have you been following God’s dietary plan for your life? If not, ask Him to help you make that change.

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1. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 378.  
2. *Ibid.*  
3. *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 312.

Numbers 11;  
Eph. 6:11;  
Heb. 11:1

## Evidence *Ancient People, Modern Lessons*

Is there archaeological evidence of a 40-year wilderness sojourn by the Israelites? There have been few discoveries in the Sinai Peninsula to support the biblical account of 600,000 men and their families spending all those years there. But even in modern times, Bedouin nomads leave little to no trace of their camps when they move to another location. So why should we expect to find “remains of large encampments after 3,000 years?”\* This is one Bible story that for now we may have to accept on faith (Heb. 11:1).

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### “You want meat? I’ll give you meat!”

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While we may not have the hard evidence we might like, there is a lot to learn from the biblical narrative. Reading Numbers 11–14 reminds us of parents dealing with recalcitrant children. The Israelites had repeatedly proclaimed that they would be obedient (Exod. 19:7, 8; 24:3, 7). When we turn forward a few pages, however, we see them complaining that they don’t have meat to eat (Num. 11:4). And this is after the miraculous daily provision of manna. I had to chuckle at God’s response. “You want meat? I’ll give you meat until it comes out of your nose!” (Num. 11:18–20, author’s paraphrase).

Time and again, God had to discipline His people. The ultimate punishment was that the complainers were barred from the Promised Land, and an 11-day journey turned into 40 years. At the end of their wandering, no one over the age of 60 was allowed to enter Canaan. The only exceptions were Caleb and Joshua, who had exhibited faith in the Lord when all others did not. What a sad commentary on a people who had seen God’s incredible power manifested so often.

It’s easy to look back on their experiences and castigate the choices the Israelites made. However, their experience should serve as a reminder that we are not immune to the forces of evil that tempt us to murmur and complain—even amid great evidence of God’s leading and provision. The only remedy is to hold fast to God and gird ourselves with His armor (Eph. 6:11).

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\*Rabbi Dovid Lichtman, “Archaeology and the Bible,” Part 2, [http://www.aish.com/societyWork/sciencenature/Archaeology\\_and\\_the\\_Bible\\_-\\_Part\\_2.asp](http://www.aish.com/societyWork/sciencenature/Archaeology_and_the_Bible_-_Part_2.asp), retrieved October 13, 2008.

## How-to Being Content

Numbers 11–14;  
Phil. 4:10–12

This week, we have seen how constant complaining caused one generation of Israelites to lose their lives in the wilderness, thus forfeiting their opportunity to live in the Promised Land (Numbers 11–14).

Complaining is a result of being discontented with circumstances that are usually beyond our control. It always seems quite hard to avoid making upsetting remarks, as doing so is part of our sinful human nature. The sad part about complaining is that it rarely ever improves the situation, but often makes it worse.

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### People today have a great tendency to fuss about many things.

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Just like the children of Israel, people today have a great tendency to fuss about many things. As human beings, we sometimes complain when we don't get our way, when the people around us seem to be much better off than we are, and a host of other reasons. Here are a few steps that can help us overcome our tendency to grumble:

*Learn to be satisfied with your abilities and possessions (Phil. 4:10–12).* Paul reminds us that we should be content no matter what our situation, whether we are in a tight situation or when things are going smoothly.

*Always maintain a thankful attitude (Ps. 105:1).* Giving thanks is one of the best ways to offset a spirit of discontent. Count your blessings and give God thanks for all of the things He has blessed you with, even those things that seem insignificant. Doing so will leave you with very few things to complain about.

*Refrain from comparing your situation to the situations of other people.* They have their own shortcomings. Instead, identify your own faults and rely on Jesus to help you remove them from your life.

### **REACT**

Think of some of the ways a complaining attitude can hinder an individual's spiritual relationship.

## The S Word Syndrome

Under enslavement for four hundred years (Gen. 15:13), murmuring and complaining had become a way of life for the Israelites. Gone were the days when it was a joy to mirror God's characteristics to nonbelievers in Egypt. The generational teachings of a coming Messiah had become remote in the minds of both young and old. Nevertheless, it was God's desire to revert their attention back to Him. Through His servant Moses, a type of Christ, and the sanctuary, which was a pattern of the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 8:1–6), God wanted His people to know that there was only one way, and that was through the Messiah.

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### He who has never murplained let him point a finger.

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The S word syndrome (selfishness) had caused the Israelites to become ambitiously and dangerously self-sufficient. They had become independent of God by turning their backs on His laws. Ironically, they thought that it was God who had forsaken them.

The archdeceiver murmured and complained about Jesus' rightful position in heaven; and, as a result, he instigated rebellion and apostasy among a third of the angels.\* Murplaining (a cross between murmuring and complaining) exerts more effort than simply listening to God. It's like frowning when we could be smiling. God missed His people so much that all He wanted to do was to reconcile them to Himself through Jesus. Their murplaining was an indication that they would reject Jesus at His first coming.

He who has never murplained let him point a finger. . . . I thought not. We feel it is our duty to "beat" up on the Israelites, but are we any different? Think about it. We murplain if a person sings off-key or if the Sabbath School lesson wasn't explained to suit our intellectual fancy. Murplaining causes us to become slaves to the S word master, Satan.

Proverbs 6:16 says, "There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him" (NIV). Five of those are a cause of murplaining (see verses 17–19). The enemy had ignited the Israelites to think that they had rights. Thus, they grew to believe that they could exist without God's laws, forgetting that murplaining against Him leads to chaos and anarchy. The S word syndrome is a one-way relationship. Satan says, "I will," God says, "Let us." It takes two when it's God's way—Jesus and me.

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\* *The Story of Redemption*, pp. 13–17.

## Exploration

## “So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt”

Exodus 14;  
15; 17; 32**CONCLUDE**

Murmuring, complaining, and other manifestations of self-centeredness, even in plain view of God’s miraculous intervention in their lives, eliminated the possibility that the original Israelites who came out of Egypt would enter the Promised Land. We are no different today. Our solution lies in maintaining a growing, trusting relationship with God on a daily (or even more frequent) basis.

**CONSIDER**

- Reading the lyrics of Keith Green’s song “So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt” at [www.lyricsfreak.com/k/keith+green/so+you+wanna+go+back+to+egypt\\_20077386.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/k/keith+green/so+you+wanna+go+back+to+egypt_20077386.html). Look for tie-ins with the material in this week’s lesson.
- Putting yourself in the Israelite camp with Moses and the rest of your relatives. Make a journal entry for the following days: Exodus 14:5–31; 15:22–25; 17:1–7; 32:1–35 (assuming you survived).
- Adapting the Song of Deliverance from Exodus 15 to God’s work in your life.
- Sharing with a trusted friend a time when you recently rebelled against God and how He showed His love for you anyway.
- Weeding a garden or flowerbed that is overgrown, then nurturing the remaining flowers. Think about how this once lovely place could have become so unattractive and the effort it took to restore it.
- Facing a small source of heat (space heater, campfire, etc.). Enjoy the warmth you feel. Describe it out loud. Turn your back and walk some distance away. Speak out loud what you feel now and how it has changed. What part did your words play in the differences you noticed? What does this teach you about the relationship between complaining and your relationship with God?

**CONNECT**

View Matthew 23 in *The Visual Bible: Matthew*. Be especially sensitive to the tone of voice the actor portraying Jesus uses.

Read the following days in Oswald Chambers’s *My Utmost for His Highest*: June 26 and 27, November 1 and 11. The readings can be accessed online at <http://www.rbc.org/utmost/index.php>.