

Don't Murmur!

It's over! Can you believe it? Passover has passed... into history. This year's Night to be Much Remembered... is but a memory. And, as always, the Days of Unleavened Bread have just flown by.

Have you heard enough about Moses, Aaron and the ancient Israelites for this year? Let us stay with them for just a little longer.

On the Last Day of Unleavened Bread, we pictured the Israelites miraculously crossing the Red Sea on dry ground – crossing to freedom, safety and a brand new way of life.

They had just witnessed weeks – perhaps even months – of incredible miracles. They had seen the River Nile turned to blood. They had witnessed miraculous plagues of frogs, gnats, flies, the death of Egyptian cattle, plagues of boils, hail and fire, locusts and impenetrable darkness. They had witnessed the killing of the Egyptian firstborn. They had seen God going before them in an immense pillar of cloud and fire. They had seen the mighty Red Sea opened before them, allowing them to cross it on dry ground, then close behind them, drowning the pursuing Egyptian army.

And what was the first thing the Israelites did after all this? Two of them – Moses and his sister Miriam – did the right thing. They sang songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. But many of their countrymen began to murmur!

In this article, I would like to give you a condensed history of murmuring amongst God's people. For the purposes of this article, we will use the (old) King James Version of the Bible.

Murmuring in Old Testament Israel

It seems that the ancient Israelites "wrote the book" on murmuring!

Before Exodus chapter 15, there is not even a mention of *teluwnah* as the word is in the Hebrew language: obstinacy, grudging, grumbling – murmuring! Probably, the Israelites hadn't dared to murmur against the cruel Egyptians when they were in slavery. But now – right after their wonderful escape to freedom – just when things were beginning to improve... well, let us read all about it in God's Word:

So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? (Exodus 15:22-24)

So soon after all of those fantastic miracles God had performed in order to bring them to freedom, they didn't seem to realize that He could so easily provide water for them. From Marah, they moved on to Elim, and from there to the Wilderness of Sin, where they started murmuring again – this time claiming that they had no food:

And they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came unto the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt. And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: and the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger. (Exodus 16:1-3)

Think about it! This was just one month after their miraculous departure from Goshen. What a ridiculous and illogical accusation! You have probably heard the saying that "the first casualty of war is truth." A study of the subject of murmuring in the Bible shows that the first result of murmuring is a diminishing of the truth. Surely the fleshpots and bread of Egypt can't have been so great for the hated Israelite slaves. And did they really believe that God would have gone to all that trouble to bring them out of Egypt just to kill them in the wilderness? Also, they *did* have food! They left Egypt with many cattle, flocks and herds:

Also take your flocks and your herds, as ye have said, and be gone; and bless me also. (Exodus 12:32)

And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand on foot that were men, beside children. And a mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle. (Exodus 12:37-38)

They had *very much* cattle with them! Had these flocks and herds disappeared somewhere? No! They still had them at a much later date when they arrived at Sinai:

And be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and present thyself there to me in the top of the mount. And no man shall come up with thee, neither let any man be seen throughout all the mount; neither let the flocks nor herds feed before that mount. (Exodus 34:2-3).

The Israelites' complaint reminds one of the spoilt woman who, standing before a closet full of clothes, wails, "I have nothing to wear!" However, God graciously and miraculously provided His complaining children with manna and quails. He also showed them in a stern rebuke that their murmuring was really against Him, not against their physical leaders who God was using as His instruments:

And in the morning, then ye shall see the glory of the LORD; for that he heareth your murmurings against the LORD: and what are we, that ye murmur against us? And Moses said, This shall be, when the LORD shall give you in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full; for that the LORD heareth your murmurings which ye murmur against him: and what are we? Your murmurings are not against us, but against the LORD. And Moses spake unto Aaron, Say unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, Come near before the LORD: for he hath heard your murmurings... I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the LORD your God. (Exodus 16:7-9, 12)

They then moved on from the Wilderness of Sin to Rephidim – where they murmured again because they didn't have any water:

And all the congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, after their journeys, according to the commandment of the LORD, and pitched in Rephidim: and there was no water for the people to drink. Wherefore the people did chide with Moses, and said, Give us water that we may drink. And Moses said unto them, Why chide ye with me? Wherefore do ye tempt the LORD? And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses, and said, Wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? And Moses cried unto the LORD, saying, What shall I do unto this people? They be almost ready to stone me... And he called the name of the place Massah, and Meribah, because of the chiding of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the LORD, saying, Is the LORD among us, or not? (Exodus 17:1-4, 7)

Again, the Israelites murmured against Moses and made ridiculous, illogical accusations against him. They chided with him. Their murmuring and chiding was so serious that they provoked God to name the place *Maccah* which means *temptation* and *Mariybah* which means *strife* or *contention*. What does the old-fashioned word *chide* mean? It is translated from either of the Hebrew words *riyb* or *ruwb* and it means to strive, to contend, to debate, to sue, to complain, and to quarrel. Let us keep these relevant translations in mind as we march on with our Israelite forefathers.

Led by an ongoing, daily miracle – God in the pillar of cloud and fire – they continued their journey and camped at Kadesh, which is situated right on the edge of the Promised Land. God had Moses send spies into Canaan. But when the spies returned, the Israelites didn't like what they heard and forgot all that God – in His great power – had done for them:

And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would God we had died in this wilderness... And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying... How long shall I bear with this evil congregation, which murmur against me? I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel, which they murmur against me. Say unto them, As truly as I live, saith the LORD, as ye have spoken in mine ears, so will I do to you: your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me, doubtless ye shall not come into the land, concerning which I sware to make you dwell therein, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun... And the men, which Moses sent to search the land, who returned, and made all the congregation to murmur against him, by bringing up a slander upon the land, even those men that did bring up the evil report upon the land, died by the plague before the LORD. (Numbers 14:2, 27-30, 36-37)

The Israelites murmured in the Wilderness of Shur. They murmured in the Wilderness of Sin. They murmured at Rephidim. They murmured at Kadesh. And shortly after they left Kadesh, Korah and his supporters again murmured against Moses and Aaron:

And Moses said unto Korah, Hear, I pray you, ye sons of Levi: Seemeth it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them? And he hath brought thee near to him, and all thy brethren the sons of Levi with thee: and seek ye the priesthood also? For which cause both thou and all thy company are gathered together against the LORD: and what is Aaron, that ye murmur against him? And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab: which said, We will not come up: Is it a small thing that thou hast brought us up out of a land that floweth with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, except thou make thyself altogether a prince over us? (Numbers 16:9-13)

Even when God executed these rebels by opening up the ground to swallow them, the remaining Israelites still had not learned their lesson. They murmured against Moses again, accusing him of killing God's people:

But on the morrow all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, saying, Ye have killed the people of the LORD. (Numbers 16:41)

Just as if Moses and Aaron possessed the power to open up the ground to swallow Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their fellow-murmurers! These people obviously weren't thinking clearly. If they were, they would not have dared repeat this murmuring against God and His chosen servants. God finally gained the Israelites' attention and stopped the constant murmuring by means of two more miracles:

And it came to pass, when the congregation was gathered against Moses and against Aaron, that they looked toward the tabernacle of the congregation: and, behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared. And Moses and Aaron came before the tabernacle of the congregation. And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Get you up from among this congregation, that I may consume them as in a moment. And they fell upon their faces. And Moses said unto Aaron, Take a censer, and put fire therein from off the altar, and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them: for there is wrath gone out from the LORD; the plague is begun. And Aaron took as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the congregation; and, behold, the plague was begun among the people: and he put on incense, and made an atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed. Now they that died in the plague were fourteen thousand and seven hundred, beside them that died about the matter of Korah. And Aaron returned unto Moses unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation: and the plague was stayed. (Numbers 16:42-50)

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and take of every one of them a rod according to the house of their fathers, of all their princes according to the house of their fathers twelve rods: write thou every man's name upon his rod. And thou shalt write Aaron's name upon the rod of Levi: for one rod shall be for the head of the house of their fathers. And thou shalt lay them up in the tabernacle of the congregation before the testimony, where I will meet with you. And it shall come to pass, that the man's rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom: and I will make to cease from me the murmurings of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you. And Moses spake unto the children of Israel, and every one of their princes gave him a rod apiece, for each prince one, according to their fathers' houses, even twelve rods: and the rod of Aaron was among their rods. And Moses laid up the rods before the LORD in the tabernacle of witness. And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds. And Moses brought out all the rods from before the LORD unto all the children of Israel: and they looked, and took every man his rod. And the LORD said unto Moses, Bring Aaron's rod again before the testimony, to be kept for a token against the rebels; and thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me, that they die not. (Numbers 17:1-10).

God took 14,700 of the murmuring rebels in a sudden plague and He caused Aaron's rod to sprout into buds, blossoms and almonds as a specific sign and warning. Notice in verse 10 of chapter 17 that God considers the sin of murmuring to be tantamount to rebellion, and in I Samuel 15:23, Samuel told Saul that God considers rebellion to be on a level with the sin of witchcraft. Murmuring is a very serious sin.

The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and this first generation of Israelites that God had freed from Egyptian slavery finally paid the death penalty for their continuous sin of murmuring. They were forbidden to enter the Promised Land:

Notwithstanding ye would not go up, but rebelled against the commandment of the LORD your God: and ye murmured in your tents, and said, because the LORD hated us, he hath brought us forth out of the land of Egypt, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us. Whither shall we go up? Our brethren have discouraged our heart, saying, The people is greater and taller than we; the cities are great and walled up to heaven; and moreover we have seen the sons of the Anakim there. Then I said unto you, Dread not, neither be afraid of them. The LORD your God which goeth before you, he shall fight for you, according to all that he did for you in Egypt before your eyes; and in the wilderness, where thou hast seen how that the LORD thy God bare thee, as a man doth bear his son, in all the way that ye went, until ye came into this place. Yet in this thing ye did not believe the LORD your God, who went in the way before you, to search you out a place to pitch your tents in, in fire by night, to shew you by what way ye should go, and in a cloud by day. And the LORD heard the voice of your words, and was wroth, and sware, saying, Surely there shall not one of these men of this evil generation see that good land, which I sware to give unto your fathers, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him will I give the land that he hath trodden upon, and to his children, because he hath wholly followed the LORD. (Deuteronomy 1:26-36)

Even when they had continual, spectacular, visual evidence of God's presence by the pillar of cloud and fire, over and over again, the Israelites showed by their murmuring that they had forgotten His loving and powerful intervention for their benefit:

Our fathers understood not thy wonders in Egypt; they remembered not the multitude of thy mercies; but provoked him at the sea, even at the Red sea... They soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel... They forgot God their saviour, which had done great things in Egypt; wondrous works in the land of Ham, and terrible things by the Red sea... Yea, they despised the pleasant land, they believed not his word: but murmured in their tents, and hearkened not unto the voice of the LORD. (Psalms 106:7, 13, 21-22, 24-25)

This appears to have been ancient Israel's worst period for the serious sin of murmuring. These events all happened within a few short years under Moses' leadership, although there was one later recorded instance under Joshua's leadership after the rulers of the tribes of Israel had promised not to attack the Gibeonites:

And the children of Israel smote them not, because the princes of the congregation had sworn unto them by the LORD God of Israel. And all the congregation murmured against the princes. (Joshua 9:18)

Murmuring in early New Testament times

By the time Jesus was born as a human being, the Israelites of that time, including the Jews, had been rejected as God's people because of their unfaithfulness and idolatry. Nevertheless, as soon as Jesus came to them, they greeted Him by resuming their murmuring against Him! There are numerous cases in the Gospel accounts of the rejected Jews murmuring against Jesus. Here is just one example:

And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day. The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven? Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among yourselves. (John 6:40-43)

Although there is some possibility that some of Jesus' disciples might have been among those who murmured against Him for eating at the home of a tax collector (Luke 19:1-7), there is only one clear instance of the disciples (who might be considered the first of His New Testament congregations) murmuring against Him:

Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you? (John 6:60-61)

What was it that caused even His disciples to murmur against Him? Jesus had been explaining that He was the "Bread of life," which was come down from heaven and that to receive eternal life, man must eat His flesh and drink His blood. The Jews had murmured about this same claim, but it also proved too deep a symbol for the disciples – who had not yet received the Holy Spirit – to understand.

Some time later, through the parable of the vineyard labourers, Jesus gave a warning to all long-serving Christians not to murmur against Him for giving the same reward to newer Christians:

And when they had received it, they murmured against the Goodman of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? (Matthew 20:11-15)

Once the Holy Spirit was made available and the New Testament Church of God began, the recorded cases of murmuring against God and His appointed human leaders were few and far between. In fact, the only detailed case is in Acts 6:1:

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.

There seems to have been some problem here between the Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking members of the early church. Although the difficulty was quickly resolved by the ordaining of the first deacons, those Greek-speaking members should have taken their problem to the apostles in an more open and respectful manner.

Understanding the human proclivity for grumbling, both Paul and Peter gave strict warnings against murmuring to various congregations of God's people:

Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. (I Corinthians 10:10)

Do all things without murmurings and disputings. (Philippians 2:14)

Use hospitality one to another without grudging. (I Peter 4:9)

The English word *grudging* used here in the King James Version is translated from the same Greek word (*goggusmos*) for *murmuring*. Many other English versions of the Bible translate the word as *murmuring*. A more severe murmuring problem arose in the early church in the late 60s AD. We read about it in the book of Jude:

For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. I will therefore put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, how that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not.... Likewise also these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities... But these speak evil of those things which they know not: but what they know naturally, as brute beasts, in those things they corrupt themselves. Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core... These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage. (Jude 4-5, 8, 10-11, 16)

These were men who had "crept in unawares" and should, perhaps, be counted among the Gnostics rather than amongst the true Christians of the time. Still, Jude compares their sin with that of Korah and his murmuring Israelite supporters, who also despised and spoke evil of God and His chosen human representatives.

Murmuring in the World Tomorrow... and beyond

Now, let us skip a step and take a brief look at murmuring in the World Tomorrow. Then we'll come back and take a look at murmuring in the church today. Does the God's Word *really* mention anything about murmuring in the World Tomorrow? Yes. But only that it will be firmly silenced.

There is some evidence that, in ancient times, Satan (then named Heylel) and his demons (then angels) preceded their attempt to take over God's throne with dissatisfaction and murmuring. They will try this yet again in one last-ditch effort at the end of the Millennium:

And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city. (Revelation 20:7-9)

For the most part, however, throughout the Millennium, any potential murmuring will be silenced, not by force, but by education:

Therefore thus saith the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob, Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale. But when he seeth his children, the work of mine hands, in the midst of him, they shall sanctify my name, and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and shall fear the God of Israel. They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine. (Isaiah 29:24)

Here God gives us the solution to murmuring. Instead of murmuring their own opinions among each other behind their leaders' backs, the people in the World Tomorrow will be busy learning true doctrine. They will be gladly accepting instruction. And after the second resurrection, many of those resurrected Israelite ex-murmurers will be there – no longer murmuring but learning doctrine! Gladly welcoming God's instruction!

Murmuring in God's church today

What is the most likely type of murmuring we might expect to see in God's 21st Century church? From the above examples quoted from the Old and New Testaments, murmuring may be defined as complaining amongst ourselves about something we don't agree with – instead of taking it respectfully to the appropriate leaders. This kind of murmuring can happen at work, with a group of employees murmuring about their boss' decisions or management style. It can happen in a family, where one spouse might murmur against the other, or where the children might murmur against their parents' decisions. And, of course, it can happen in God's church, where some members might murmur against the decisions of the church leaders. What about us? Do we murmur about some of the decisions of our church leaders?

Murmuring is fruitless and destructive. It never brings the desired results. We must take any problems – whether real or perceived – to our ministers in an open and respectful way.

It is very obvious that neither God nor Moses were leading the children of Israel away from a comfortable home in Egypt in order to kill them in the wilderness. Likewise today, it should be obvious to us all that neither God nor His true ministers are attempting to lead us into error and death. They want only what is best for us, and that within the bounds of God's law.

So there it is – a condensed history of murmuring amongst God's people – from ancient pre-history to the time following the Second Resurrection.

As we leave Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread behind us for another year, let us not murmur against the spiritual leaders God has blessed us with. Let us resist the devil as he tries to tempt us to murmur, and he will flee from us. Let us submit ourselves to God. With study, prayer and love, let us accept the instruction, counsel, and decisions of our spiritual leaders. Let us follow them as they follow Jesus Christ.

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