

# Grumbling in the Wilderness

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Sunday Plan

SCRIPTURE

Numbers 20–21

MEMORY VERSE

1 Thessalonians 5:18

OPTIONAL VIDEO

The Bronze Serpent

<https://southside.cc/586-573>

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*Gratitude helps us see God's good gifts.*

## For the Teacher

Read this before you teach. The kids have followed God's people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and to Mount Sinai. Today they're in the wilderness — somewhere between rescue and the Promised Land — and the people are not handling it well. They grumble. A lot. The kids should leave with one idea firmly in place.

### KEY TRUTH

Gratitude helps us see God's good gifts.

**Grumbling is the sin of forgotten rescue.** Numbers 20 and 21 sit late in the wilderness years. By this point God has split a sea for these people, fed them with manna every morning for decades, given them water out of rocks, and met them on a mountain in fire. And they're complaining about the menu. The point isn't that they were uniquely awful — it's that grumbling is what happens to anyone who stops paying attention to what God has already done. The cure is the same now as it was then: deliberate, honest gratitude.

**Two complaints, two gifts, one warning.** Today's lesson walks through three scenes. In Numbers 20:2–11 the people complain about water and God gives them water from a rock. In Numbers 21:4–5 they complain about the food and the journey itself. In Numbers 21:6–9 the grumbling tips into open contempt — “we loathe this worthless food,” talking about the manna God himself sent — and snakes come into the camp. God still rescues, but he uses the moment to put their sin in front of them. The bronze serpent on a pole is the image: look up in faith, live. Jesus himself points back to this in John 3:14 — “as Moses lifted up the serpent... so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” You don't need to teach John 3 today, but you should know it's there.

**Don't moralize away the grace.** It would be easy to turn this into “don't whine or God will send snakes.” That's not the point. The point is that God keeps providing for an ungrateful people, and that gratitude is how the people would have *seen* what God was already doing. The kids should walk out grateful, not scared.

**What we're skipping and why.** Numbers 20 also includes Moses striking the rock instead of speaking to it, and the consequence — that he won't enter the Promised Land. That's a heavy adult-level discussion about leadership and obedience, and it would crowd out the kids' bottom line today. Save it for an older class.

**Repeat the bottom line all morning.** Say it at least six times. Have the kids say it back. Write it on the board. End with it.

### MATERIALS

- Bibles for every student
- Whiteboard or large paper, markers
- Pencils, crayons or colored pencils
- A blindfold or bandana
- A small basket with five or six everyday “blessings” — a bottle of water, a snack, a small Bible, a flashlight, a pencil, a piece of fruit
- Activity sheets (printed in advance from this week's activities — pick what you'll use)

## 1. Gather

Welcome the kids back. Tell them today picks up the story a long time after the Red Sea — God's people are out in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, and they have a problem. It isn't Pharaoh. It isn't a sea. It's their own grumbling.

## ASK

*What's something small that, when it doesn't go your way, makes you really grumpy?*

Let two or three kids answer. Pancakes vs. cereal, the wrong color cup, having to share, a sibling getting the last cookie. Don't lecture — just collect the honest answers. Then tell them: today we're going to meet a whole nation of people who got really good at grumbling, and we'll learn one big idea about why that matters.

Write the bottom line on the board:

## SAY

*Gratitude helps us see God's good gifts.*

## 2. The Story

### Setting the Stage

Tell them, in your own words: it's been a long time since the Red Sea. God's people have been wandering in the wilderness for years. Every morning God sends them food called manna — bread that just appears on the ground. He has been with them in a pillar of cloud. He has given them his commandments. He has been taking care of them, day after day.

But they're tired. They're hot. They want something different to eat. And they start to do something that becomes the biggest problem in the whole wilderness story. They grumble.

### The First Complaint — No Water

Have everyone open to Numbers 20:2. Pick a confident reader.

#### Numbers 20:2-5

## DISCUSSION

1. What were the people complaining about?

→ *No water. They wanted to know why Moses had brought them out of Egypt to a place with no water. Notice the kicker — they say they wish they'd died instead of being rescued. That's how upside-down grumbling makes you.*

2. God had already rescued these people from slavery, parted a sea for them, and fed them every morning. What had they stopped noticing?

→ *Everything God had already done. Grumbling makes you blind to the gifts that are already in your hand.*

Now have a different student read what God does next:

#### Numbers 20:7-11

Tell them, in your own words: God doesn't punish the people for complaining. He gives them water. Out of a rock. A whole nation drinks because God is *still* providing — even for an ungrateful people.

## SAY

*God is patient. He keeps giving good gifts even to people who don't say thank you. But there's a problem: the people don't see his good gifts when they're busy grumbling.*

### The Second Complaint — The Snakes

Have them turn to Numbers 21:4. Pick another reader.

## Numbers 21:4-9

Stop and walk through it slowly with them. The people complain again — this time about the food God himself is sending. They call the manna “worthless.” Then snakes come into the camp. The people realize their sin and ask Moses to pray. God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who looks at it lives.

### DISCUSSION

1. In verse 5, what do the people say about the food God has been giving them?

→ *They call it “worthless.” They’ve stopped seeing manna as a miracle and started treating it as a complaint. That’s what grumbling does — it turns gifts into burdens.*

2. When the people realized they had sinned, what did they ask Moses to do?

→ *Pray for them. Ask God to take the snakes away. The grumbling stops the second they remember who God is.*

3. Look at verse 9. What did people have to do to live?

→ *Look up. Just look — in faith — at the bronze snake God told Moses to make. They didn’t earn it; they just looked. God provided the rescue.*

### NOTE

If a kid asks why God used a snake, the short answer is: the thing that was hurting them became the picture of how God saves. Many years later Jesus pointed to this story when he talked about the cross (John 3:14). You don’t need to teach that today — just file it away if a sharp kid asks where the story leads.

## 3. The Point

Say the bottom line again, with the kids:

### SAY

*Gratitude helps us see God’s good gifts.*

### The Blessing Blindfold

Pull out the blindfold and the basket of everyday gifts. Pick a volunteer to come up. Blindfold them.

Hold up one item from the basket — a water bottle, a snack, a Bible. Ask them, “*Can you see this gift?*” They’ll say no. Do it once or twice more. Then take the blindfold off and hold up the same item. “*Can you see it now?*”

Tell the class: the gifts were there the whole time. The volunteer just couldn’t see them. **Grumbling is like a blindfold.** It doesn’t make God’s gifts disappear — it just makes you stop noticing them. Gratitude is what takes the blindfold off.

### The Memory Verse

Have everyone turn to 1 Thessalonians 5:18. Read it together:

### SCRIPTURE

*1 Thessalonians 5:18*

*Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Read it together three ways: all together normally, all together in a whisper, then once with their hands

open in front of them like they're receiving something.

Tell them: it doesn't say "give thanks when things are easy." It says "in all circumstances." Even in the wilderness. Even when the food is boring. Even when something hard is happening. Gratitude is how God's people keep their eyes open.

### What This Means For Us

#### DISCUSSION

1. What's one good gift from God that you sometimes forget to thank him for?

→ *Listen for: family, food, a warm bed, friends, school, the Bible, their own body working, Jesus. Don't help too fast — let them name things themselves.*

2. What's something you've been grumbling about this week that God might actually be using for your good?

→ *Push gently here. Possibilities: a chore that teaches responsibility, a sibling who teaches patience, schoolwork that stretches them, a no from a parent that protects them. The honest answer is the right one.*

Say the bottom line one more time, with the kids:

#### SAY

*Gratitude helps us see God's good gifts.*

### Closing Prayer

#### PRAY

*God, you fed your people manna every morning in the wilderness, and they called it worthless. We do the same thing — we grumble about gifts you've given us. Forgive us. This week, take the blindfolds off our eyes. Help us notice what you've already done and say thank you. Amen.*

## 4. The Work

Pick one or more activities from this week's menu. Print enough copies for each kid in advance. The kids don't have to do all of them — pick what fits the group's energy and what time you have left.

The menu for this week:

- **Water from the Rock** — coloring page of Moses, the rock, and the people drinking, with the memory verse.
- **Wilderness Words** — word search with names and key words from Numbers 20–21.
- **My Thank-You List** — drawing prompt where the kids draw three of God's good gifts they want to remember to thank him for.
- **Remember the Story** — fill-in-the-blanks recall using the kids' Bibles.

The full production specs for each activity are in this week's activities file.

#### NOTE

While the kids work, sit with them. Ask one or two what they're working on. Reinforce the bottom line one more time before class ends.

## What Comes Next Week

The kids will keep walking with God's people through the wilderness toward the land God promised them — and meet what comes next in the journey to the Promised Land.