

Complainers Never Win
Philippians 4:4-6, 11-13 and Exodus 16:1-4, 17:1-7
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When we left Moses and the children of Israel last week, they had just witnessed God's saving grace in the parting of the Red Sea. Exodus 15 records two hymns of praise that were part of the peoples' worship and celebration of God's redemption. It's not hard to sing and shout for joy when God's mighty deeds have just saved your hide. The question we confront in today's story is: can or will that song continue when God's salvation turns out to not quite live up to its billing?

On the other side of the sea is the wilderness. The wilderness wanderings, as this 40-year period is often called, is a surprise to Israel, or at least their length and breadth. Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, they get a desert. Instead of the stability of their own homes, they get constant motion. The divine promise seems to fall short. Dancers and singers are stopped dead in their tracks. Salvation from one kind of death leads straight into the teeth of another. The sea crossing begins to look like a tease, a point of unreal exhilaration between one kind of trouble and another, only the last is worse than the first. Bondage with security and resources seems preferable to freedom and living from one oasis to another.

And the wilderness starts to feel permanent. Forty years is a long time in the old sandbox. Wilderness is life beyond redemption but short of consummation. The promise has been spoken, but who can live by words alone? The hope has been proclaimed, but the horizon keeps disappearing in the sandstorms. And so trust in God often turns to resentment. Faith erodes with the dunes.

Israel's singing is still reverberating across the desert sands, but within hours there is a major conundrum: no water to drink. That crisis is followed by a food shortage and then another water shortage. Songs of praise quickly dissolve into grumbling, and a pattern emerges that will be repeated numerous times: a problem arises; the people complain; Moses intercedes; God responds with deliverance.

On the face of it, the peoples' complaints seem reasonable. To complain about a lack of drinkable water or a morsel of bread or meat in such unforgiving and inhospitable surroundings is not to quibble about non-necessities or luxuries. Israel finds itself in a series of life-and-death situations. The problem with their

complaints is not that what they are asking for is unreasonable; it is in their total lack of faith. It seems they have learned nothing from the plagues, the Passover, or the Red Sea deliverance. Rather than remembering their experiences of God's faithfulness and care in the past, and allowing that memory to form their response to the current situation, they give in to self-pity, fear and despair—characteristics that are typical and understandable of slaves but that won't do for a people who are to make God's name known throughout the earth. The desert, and the tests they face here, will become the proving ground by which Israel matures into its calling.

Complaining can be an insidious habit. We grumble if we are caught in slow moving traffic, if the waiter at the restaurant messes up our order, if the kids forget to put something away, if it unexpectedly rains on our freshly washed car, if the grocery store is out of our favorite flavor of ice cream—or our spouse eats the last of it without leaving any for us. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of things that we grouse about. It's tempting to downplay the seriousness of chronic complaining, but I want us to carefully consider what complaining really tells us about ourselves.

1. Grumbling is a gratitude problem. We grumble as a response to inconvenience, pain, or difficulties. We grumble because we think we should experience pleasure rather than sorrow and prosperity rather than adversity. Why me? is a common question we ask when we are failing to be grateful. Why didn't I get the promotion? Why is my teenager the one caught shoplifting? Why am I the one with cancer?

Have you ever noticed how seldom we turn those questions around? Maybe we should ask, how is it that I have been blessed with a job when so many people are out of work? Why have I been blessed with a home and enough to eat when so many people have neither? Why has God given me a loving partner, or the opportunity to go to school, or access to good doctors and medicine? All that we have is a gift, and when we fail to acknowledge those gifts—and the God who gives them to us—we fall into the habit of complaining.

2. Grumbling is a perception problem. Grumbling causes us to distort the facts. There is an exaggerated memory of the past and often an exaggerated view of the current or future situation. The Hebrews had the audacity to say to Moses, "We wish we had died back in Egypt where at least we sat by our flesh pots and ate our fill of bread, rather than being brought to this wilderness so you can kill us all with famine." They conveniently forgot the lash of the taskmaster and their anguish to be free as they did the relentless, backbreaking work of Pharaoh. And, their

perception of their current circumstances was overly negative. They failed to even consider that God was at work. They wore rose-colored glasses to look at the past but the lens of pessimism to see their present and future possibilities.

3. Grumbling is contagious. In Exodus 15, in light of the bitter water, the complaining was just among some of the people. By chapter 16, the “whole congregation” is complaining. Negativity is like that. Jesus tells us we are to be yeast, and what Jesus has in mind is that we’re to be positive yeast, yeast that leavens the dough of life with hope, peace, faithfulness, righteousness and love. But, grumbling can also work like yeast, spreading and infecting an entire family, company, classroom or congregation with criticism, distrust and cynicism.

4. Complainers are always looking for someone to blame. The people accuse Moses of leading them into the wilderness to kill them. Now, think about that from Moses’ point of view...he gave up his comfy retirement in Midian to go back to Egypt to rescue them. He risked life and limb to challenge Pharaoh. Now he’s leading an entire nation to the Promised Land, responsible for their safety and well-being throughout the journey, and all of this in obedience to God. And, all the people can think to do is mumble, grumble and accuse him of ulterior motives. Leadership is hard under the best of circumstances, and complainers make it even harder.

5. Complainers are never satisfied with what they’re given. In response to the peoples’ complaints about being hungry, God provides them with quail and bread. The quail come in the evening, covering the camp, and in the morning, a small, round, flaky substance covers the ground—manna. The Hebrews did not have to work for this food. They did not have to worry about whether they would have enough or whether they might go hungry, but they still were not satisfied with it.

6. Complainers not only are unsatisfied with *what* they’re give, they’re also not satisfied with *how much* they’re given. There is a stark contrast in God’s gift of manna and Israel’s experience of that gift. When it comes to meeting the needs of his people, God is no Ebenezer Scrooge. God is not miserly. God does not hoard or dole out divine blessings reluctantly in parsimonious pinches. God says he will “rain” bread from heaven such that not a single person in the community will go hungry. But, that’s not good enough for some people. They try to take more than their share, to stockpile this gift of God. But, it doesn’t work. The only result produced by their greed is for worms to infest the hoarded manna. “Use it or lose it” is one lesson learned from this experience, but the bigger lesson is that these people are to be marked by their daily dependence on God to supply their needs.

The way Jesus will put it is, “Don’t worry about tomorrow.” God has faithfully met your needs in the past and God will continue to faithfully meet your needs today. “Give us *this day* our daily bread,” he taught us to pray.

In some sense these potentially life-threatening deprivations work as a test for Israel. In fact, the language of testing is specifically used in chapter 15 with the undrinkable water at Marah. This time of testing is best understood if you think of Israel as teenagers. Time is needed for them to mature, to gain an understanding of what it means to be a people of faith. Right now, they are still locked in their past. To change metaphors for a moment, the Israelites’ mind-set is not unlike that of a criminal released from incarceration. Imprisonment, but with three meals a day and a bed at night, can be more appealing than struggling with the challenges of freedom. Being told what to do, when to do it, and how can be easier than having to make one’s own responsible choices. For victims of oppression, in a strange way Egypt can become Eden. A ghetto can become a garden. Pharaoh can turn out to be not such a bad guy, after all. Or so it seems.

Israel is still looking behind them, remembering what life was like. God wants them to think about what can be. The idea of security, but outside the will of God, still seems preferable to insecurity and uncertainty inside the will of God. Relying on God day by day in the wilderness will work to change that.

The idea of testing shows up again in chapter 17, but this time it is the people testing God, rather than the other way around. Again, lack of water leads to complaining, despite the peoples’ experience of God’s provision of water at Marah. This time, at Meribah, the peoples’ complaint turns to demand, not only of Moses but by extension, of God, and that is the crux of the problem. OT scholar Janzen puts it this way: “To test God is to pose an ultimatum in which we decide what counts as evidence of God’s presence, and then decide on God’s presence or absence on the basis of whether God has met the test we have posed. It’s a way to try to coerce God to act or show himself.” In essence, it’s human beings demanding that God jump through our hoops and become accountable and answerable to us. Sovereignty passes to us.

The “growing up” process for a people of faith is not a walk in the park; it’s a journey through the desert. Even when we are called, when we’re following day by day and God is faithfully providing for us, God’s leading does not always move directly toward oases, and God’s interests do not always coincide with ours. God is interested in the condition of our hearts, and our hearts are made right for God through our obedience. Obedience in one circumstance sets up another

opportunity for obedience. One instance of responding faithfully does not bring the Israelites to a plateau where obedience is no longer a concern. The people of God are always moving from one occasion for obedience to another. With maturity, we get to obedience more naturally, as our wills conform to the will of God. And, hopefully, like a sullen teenager who emerges into a delightful, diligent young adult, we obey more readily and with less grumbling. Amen.