

When the Goin' Gets Tough, Everyone Complains

Exodus 15:22 – 17:7

8 ways you can tell it's going to be a rotten day:

- 8) You put both contact lenses in the same eye.
- 7) Your income tax refund check bounces.
- 6) Your boss tells you not to bother to take off your coat.
- 5) Your car horn goes off accidentally and remains stuck as you follow a group of Hell's Angel's on a deserted highway.
- 4) Your twin sister forgot your birthday.
- 3) You turn on the news and they are showing emergency routes out of the city.
- 2) You see the "60 Minutes" news team in your office.
- 1) You are Moses leading a group of people, experiencing post traumatic stress disorder, in the wilderness, and you've run out of water and food!

I. No Water! – Exodus 15:22-27

I can't ever remember going a full day without water – let alone three days, let alone three days in the desert. This is the situation of the Israelites. Then imagine their relief when they spot an oasis – "Water ahoy!"

Those rushing on ahead, thrust their hands into the pools of water, bring the cool water to their lips and take a deep, long gulp. And then, spit it out, gagging because of its bitterness. "Goin' to be a good day, right?"

The place even gets a descriptive name: "Marah," meaning *bitterness*. Places in those days were given names that meant something. I suppose that is true even in our country.

Burke, for example, is named for Silas Burke (1796–1854), a 19th century farmer, merchant, and local politician who built a house on a hill overlooking the valley of Pohick Creek in approximately 1824. The house is still standing.

There's a town in Iowa, founded in 1856, that was given the name Putsey. At some point, it must have occurred to someone, "What does this stand for?" Not having an answer, they renamed the town – Fertile. Now that would sure describe the rich, black soil around that prairie area. Then, unfortunately, a town 11 miles to the east was incorporated in 1898. It was named Manly. It was only a matter of time before there was be a wedding announcement in the local newspaper: "Manly Man Weds Fertile Woman." Too bizarre to be false!

Anyway, I digress...The people and livestock are thirsting. The water is spoiled. What logically comes next? Grumbling. **Verse 24.** The people grumbled against Moses. But, as we've seen before, who is the real target of their complaint? God!

The entire text we are examining this morning – from 15:22 – 17:7, is the story of Israel's whining and complaining against God. I looked up "grumble" in the on-line dictionary:

Grumble: to murmur or mutter in discontent, complain sullenly.

So, I looked up "complain:"

Complain: to express dissatisfaction, pain, censure, resentment, or grief; to find fault.

I looked up one other word that I thought fit the Israelites from the text:

Whine: to snivel or complain in a peevish, self-pitying way.

That's the Israelites here: grumbling, complaining, whining. Now, complaint in the Old Testament isn't always a bad thing. We have, for example, an entire section of the psalms called the Lament Psalms. This type of psalm is "a cry of need in a context of crisis when Israel lacks the resources to fend for itself." Another way of looking at it is all the more basic: laments simply being "appeals for divine help in distress".

When you see this in the Old Testament, there are boundaries around the lament; they never become an attack against God and his character. The psalmist is quick to note that God is good and wise and sovereign.

But here in the exodus, this is a rebellious complaint. It is something, we will discover, the people do very well, and every often.

Moses, having a rotten day, cries out to God. Now if you were God, what would you do? You have just rescued this nation from slavery, doing miracle after miracle in the form of plagues against the enslaving nation of Egypt, including the slaying of every firstborn in the land, both human and livestock.

You gave the people instructions on what to do to save their own families: sacrifice an unblemished lamb as a substitute and sprinkle the blood on the doorposts and lintel of their homes. You have forced Pharaoh's hand so that he summarily dismissed the Israelites from his land.

You did this little miracle at the Red Sea. Oh yeah, and you drowned the pursuing Egyptian army. Then the people go three days without water, find a spoiled oasis, and begin to complain and grumble. What would you want to do to the people?

Fortunately, neither you nor I are God. God graciously provides sweet water. And then he makes a deal with them: “If you listen to my voice, and do what is right, and obey my commands, I will not visit plagues upon you.”

We have no record of their reply to God. But I suspect, as we see throughout their history, they throw a salute God’s direction and respond, “Aye, Aye.”

They leave Marah and come to Elim. It’s interesting that the biblical record notes this about that place: 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees. How many tribes? – 12. How many elders of Israel? – 70.

What is God saying to Israel? What is he trying to teach them? “I will take care of you! I, who called you by name, who chose to set my love upon you, who made a covenant with your father Abraham, who brought you up out of Egypt, I will watch over you.”

This is very reminiscent of Jesus’ care for his disciples. Remember the instance where he fed the multitude? After everyone had been served and had eaten as much as they wanted, Jesus instructs the twelve to pick up all the remaining food. How much was left over? How much did they collect? Twelve baskets full! One for each of them! Was that a coincidence? I don’t think so.

II. No Food!

The people are refreshed and set out on their journey again. It’s now T+45 days following their departure from Egypt. **Exodus 16:1** – Reading on: “And the whole congregation of the people of Israel rejoiced in their circumstances and the opportunity to trust their God.” Oh, your Bible doesn’t read that way?

Exodus 16:2-3

These folks are getting killed with their assumptions. In the back of their minds, after Elim, it must have been: “Oh boy, hunky dory, no more problems, no more worries, God is on our side. Easy street from here on.” Not!

That’s the problem with assumptions – they take you where you really don’t want to go. It was the end of the school year, and a kindergarten teacher was receiving gifts from her pupils. The florist’s son handed her a gift. She shook it, held it overhead, and said, “I bet I know what it is. Some flowers.”

"That's right" the boy said, "but how did you know?" "Oh, just a wild guess," she said.

The next pupil was the sweet shop owner's daughter. The teacher held her gift overhead, shook it, and said, "I bet I can guess what it is. A box of sweets." "That's right, but how did you know?" asked the girl. "Oh, just a wild guess," said the teacher.

The next gift was from the son of the liquor storeowner. The teacher held the package overhead, but it was leaking. She touched a drop of the leakage with her finger and touched it to her tongue. "Is it wine?" she asked. "No," the boy replied, with some excitement. The teacher repeated the process, taking a larger drop of the leakage to her tongue. "Is it champagne?" she asked. "No," the boy replied, with more excitement. The teacher took one more taste before declaring, "I give up, what is it?" With great glee, the boy replied, "It's a puppy!"

Unmet expectations, unwarranted assumptions distort perspective. "Oh, it would have been better to die in Egypt with a full belly than out here on an empty stomach!" Really?

Notice they are not content to just long for the "good old days;" they question the motive of Moses and Aaron – and, more significantly, that of God. "You really just brought us out here to kill us!"

Listen, God could have done that back in Egypt with the plagues. He didn't have to put up with all of this! He could have done it at the hands of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. He could have drowned them in the Sea. He could have let them die of thirst. Oh, so many opportunities; why wait until now?

Okay, here's our scenario again. You're God; what do you do? Good thing this is just play-acting on our part.

Exodus 16:4-30

Four times the text says that the Lord heard their grumbling: verses 7, 8, 9 & 12. Is God patient or what? How about longsuffering? How about merciful, gracious, faithful, loving?

Did you see what it was again that the people were to learn about God? **Verses 6-7.** The main purpose in God supplying food was not to fill their bellies, but to teach them about himself. The food was God's gift to his people. It was a tangible expression of his love and care.

And yet, it would come with a test. The quail was not a repeated thing. But the manna was provided daily. Why only for that day's need? I think it was to remind Israel of her

dependency upon God. They would have to trust in his provision day by day, day after day. Perhaps this is the same intent implied in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread."

This should be our mindset, regardless of how much money we have in the bank, "Lord, I trust you to meet my needs today."

Remember the instruction in chapter 15 about collecting the manna? Some of the people just didn't listen. Some of them just didn't obey. As a result, they had some unplanned fasts on the Sabbath. It probably didn't take too many weeks for them to get the instructions right.

This is all about dependence, about trust. Moses, writing later as they were encamped opposite the Promised Land – Deuteronomy 8 – looking back at the experience following the exodus:

And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.
– *Deuteronomy 8:3*

Does that statement ring a bell? It should. It is the retort Jesus gives to Satan during the temptation to focus on physical needs above trust in God to provide.

Two things to note before the people move on – **Exodus 16:31-35**

- 1) Israel was to remember God's provision in the wilderness. This was to be another visible reminder of God's faithfulness to them.
- 2) This manifestation of God's provision was to be a regular part of their lives over the next 40 plus years. It wasn't until they were ready to cross over into Canaan, the Promised Land, that the manna would cease.

III. No Water!

Exodus 17:1 Sound familiar? Haven't we seen this before?

Exodus 17:2 – They've gone beyond complaining; now they are quarreling! Moses points out the obvious: "You are not testing me; you are testing God!"

Let's finish the story and then go back to see some things: **Exodus 17:2-7**

The Israelites have a fixation on this idea that God brought them out of Egypt to kill them. Why would he go to that trouble? He could have killed them weeks before back in Egypt. I like the way that Philip Graham Ryken identifies the three complaints the Israelites make:

- 1) They demand God's provision – **Vs. 2a**. "Give us water to drink." There is no "Please, pretty please." They demand water as if it is their right.
- 2) They deny God's protection – **Vs. 3**. They suffer from memory lapses, don't they? It wasn't long before that the Lord provided all the sweet water they could drink. But this is one of the great sins of Israel – forgetfulness. How easy God's people (think "us" here) succumb to this dreaded disease: forgetfulness. Forgetfulness leads to ingratitude, which leads to complaining, whining and grumbling, which leads to bitterness if you're not careful.
- 3) They doubt God's presence – **Verse 7**. How much more could God do to demonstrate his presence with his people? I don't know.

Throughout these three experiences in the text today, we see God testing Israel: would they believe? Would they trust?

Now, the situation has progressed to the point that it isn't Israel who is in the docket and God sitting as judge. It is God who is in the docket and Israel is sitting as judge. Verse 2 – "Why do you test the Lord?" Verse 7 – "Because they tested the Lord."

Moses, writing later in Deuteronomy 33, speaks of God, and I quote: "whom you tested at Massah, with whom you quarreled at the waters of Meribah...."

Two symbols here for Israel:

- 1) Manna in a jar – to remind the people of God's goodness towards them;
- 2) Two places: Massah & Meribah, "testing" and "quarreling" – to remind the people of their lack of trust. One: a reminder of God's faithfulness; the other a reminder of Israel's faithlessness.

Conclusions

The book of Exodus represents the pattern for the Christian. Israel is saved in her deliverance out of slavery and then begins the process of sanctification. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, wrote:

We, too, pass through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land. With Israel we fall into doubt and unbelief and through punishment and repentance experience again God's help and faithfulness. All this is not mere reverie but holy, godly reality. We are torn out of our own existence and set down in the midst of the holy history of God on earth. There God dealt with us, and there He still deals with us, our needs and our sins, in judgment and grace.

The experiences of Israel are given as an example to us. Turn in your Bible to the New Testament book of First Corinthians, chapter ten:

I Corinthians 10:1-11

Ryken writes:

God's people may well have expected to head straight for Canaan, going from grace right on to glory. Instead their triumph was followed by tribulation. God's plan did not call for any short cuts. The Promised Land could only be reached by way of the wilderness.

Isn't that the story of the Christian's life? God doesn't save us and take us right to glory, to our Promised Land. He begins the process of sanctification – of making us holy, fit for his kingdom. That often, if not always, involves time in the wilderness, in the desert. He does this for the same reasons he did it for Israel: to bring glory to himself, to display his power in us, to demonstrate his love and care for us, to develop dependence upon him.

We too are tested in the wilderness experiences of life. Our choices are the same as Israel's: trust or grumble. But here's a twist for you to consider. Ted Kyle and John Todd give a perspective in a piece titled *Why Me, Lord?*

Many of us are like the person who said, "My car broke down and it cost me \$400 to get it fixed.... \$400 that I did not have. Why me Lord? After all, I've been better than most. Why are you treating me this way? Why are you punishing me this way? Then the TV went on the blink, and so did the dishwasher, and the clothes dryer and the lawn mower, and even the iron! Why me, Lord? Besides that, why, at my age, should I still be having financial problems? Why am I not "set" financially like some others I know? Why have you denied me opportunities for fame and fortune that you have given to others? Why me, Lord?"

"When I find myself starting to think like this, it sometimes helps for me to ask the same questions about the other aspects of my life. Lord, what have I done that is so grand that you should have blessed me with a car, a TV set, a clothes-dryer, a lawn mower, and an

iron? Why did you give me all these things anyway? Why me, Lord?

“Lord, why did you permit me to be born in America with all its plenty? I could have been born in poverty-stricken Bangladesh instead of rich America. Why me, Lord? Lord, why did you give me the opportunity to have a job when so many, who are as deserving as I, are without work? Why me, Lord?

“Lord, why did you give me good health? Others have died at my age of heart attacks or are crippled by accidents or disease. Why should I escape ill health when other religious people do not? Why me, Lord?

Lord, why have you spared me from the sorrows that strike so many other families? Others, wonderful people, have lost close relatives, but I haven't. Why me, Lord?

When I think of all the ways the Lord has blessed me, though I don't deserve it. I wonder how I could possibly complain about the relatively insignificant things that go wrong in my life from time to time. If I could only learn to count my blessings.” [Ted Kyle and John Todd. A Treasury of Bible Illustrations. “Why Me Lord?” # 260 (Nashville: AMG Publishers, 1995) pp/ 96-97.]

What's the key to guarding against grumbling & complaining? I would suggest cultivating the attitude of gratitude.