

Any Complaints?

Exodus 15:22-16:12

Pastor Jim Rademaker

A utility company received a call from a customer complaining about the exceptionally high quality of customer service. It was suggested that less money was spent on staff training and the savings put to reducing customer bills.

Linus says to Lucy, "Are you complaining again? Do you realize you spend all of your time complaining?" Lucy responds, "Why shouldn't I complain?"

What a great question. "Why shouldn't I complain?" That's how they felt that day in the desert. It was hot. They were miserable. They were tired. They'd been traveling by foot for three days now, searching everywhere for water, but failing to find a drop.

Finally, after three days, water!!! But when they taste it, "Yuck!" It's bitter. Tainted. Not fit to drink. Drinking it would do more harm than good. And so, after all they had been through, the people began to grumble, to complain. And who could blame them!

Who is this Moses? What kind of leader is he - leading them out into the middle of nowhere, only to die of thirst? Did he have any idea what he was doing? If they had taken a vote, Moses would have been gone in a second, replaced by someone else. Anyone would better than Moses! They grumbled and complained. Why shouldn't they?

Only three days earlier, instead of complaining, they had been singing! Rejoicing! Overwhelmed with gratitude and praise! *"I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.*
(Exodus 15:1-21)

Unbelievable what the Lord had done! Leading them through the midst of the Red Sea, as if on dry land, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. Drowning, destroying, completely wiping out the mighty Egyptian army. Freeing them, once and for all, from the bondage of slavery!

Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to

Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" (Exodus 15:22-27)

When times were good and things went *their* way, what did God's people do? They rejoiced! They had a party with music and dancing! But what about when times weren't so good and things didn't go their way? Grumble, grumble, grumble. Complain, complain, complain! Like Lucy responding to Linus, "Why shouldn't I complain?"

How could they be so fickle? How can we? "It's too hot. It's too cold. It's too dry. It's too wet. I've got too much to do. I don't have enough to do. There's never enough money to pay the bills. I wish I were older, a grown-up. I wish I were younger, oh ... to be a kid again. Do I have to get out of bed today? Do I have to go work? Do I have to go to school? Do I have to go to church?"

After coming down from their mountain top experience at the Red Sea, weariness and hunger and thirst soon set in. And they turned from rejoicing to complaining. So much for trusting in their Heavenly Father. So much for remembering who it was that

was leading them through the desert. So much for the One who graciously leads *us* every day of our lives.

What's behind all this grumbling? One definition of grumbling is "to mutter in discontent". There it is. When we grumble, what are we really doing? Often times, our grumbling is expressing something we're not even aware of. A heart that's discontent.

Content. "To appease the desires of". After a juicy hamburger and large order of fries, we're content. Our desire for food has been appeased. Our hunger pains are gone. We're satisfied. And what happens when we *don't* have our desires appeased? What happens when our savings account balance doesn't satisfy? When our health fails us? When things don't go as we had planned? What happens when we don't have our desires appeased? How do we respond when things don't go the way we want them to?

When the Israelites weren't getting what they wanted, when life wasn't happy and cheerful all the time, when supply of food and drink wasn't satisfactory, when their desires weren't met, how did they respond? The same way you and I often do. They grumbled. They muttered in discontent.

And when things don't go our way, *who* do we grumble to? The waitress. Our spouse. The teacher. Our boss. Our co-workers? Anyone fortunate enough to be near us at the time. The Israelites grumbled against Moses. But who were they *really* grumbling about? Who are they really discontent with?

The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin ... on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way, I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions ..."

Moses also said, "You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the

evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD." (Exodus 16:1-8)

When we grumble at the weather man or the waitress or the alarm clock or our parents or our spouse, who are we really upset with?

When things don't go your way, when circumstances take a turn for the worst, when life doesn't turn out like we had planned, we face a test. A test of faith. What are my real desires? What is my true contentment?

As Jesus said to the woman at the well, *"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but ... the water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

In the beginning, God breathed life into man. You were made in God's image. Created as His beloved child, to look to Him, to desire Him above all else, to be content in Him. As Augustine famously put it, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You."

Or as the Psalmist expressed it, *"My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from Him. He*

*alone is my rock and my salvation;
He is my fortress, I will never be
shaken.”* (Psalm 62:1-2)

The water was too polluted to drink. The cupboards were getting bare. The meat in the freezer was almost gone. And their leader seemed completely clueless to know what to do about any of it.

The crises we face are tests. Faced with the next crisis, the next test, how will you respond? Whining and complaining, or trusting and following the One who leads you every day - even in the desert? The desert - that place where all that we depend upon is stripped away, and we're left alone with God. Alone, to either grumble and give up on God, or entrust our lives into His hands.

Remember Job's response, after his deep grief of losing everything near and dear to him? *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."* (Job 1:21)

Their backs against the wall of the Red Sea, facing certain destruction. Hungering and thirsting in the desert with no hope of survival. What could possibly save them! What possible hope did they have, but a miraculous deliverance! ...

then you will know that I am the Lord YOUR God ... in a way you wouldn't have known had you been able to feed yourself. "I will take care of you. Trust Me!" When we find ourselves in the desert, when our own resources are gone, we're left as a newborn, trusting our parents for everything we need; life itself.

Out in the desert, the spot of their grumbling would forever be known as *Massah* and *Meribah*. Testing and grumbling, instead of testing and trusting.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did." (Ps. 95:7b-9)

"It's too hot. It's too cold. It's too dry. It's too wet. I wish I were older, a grown-up. I wish I were younger. Grumbling and complaining. We have that down pretty well, even if we've gotten good on hiding it on the outside.

"Are you complaining again? Do you realize you spend all of your time complaining?" "Why shouldn't I complain?"

Look again to the cross and you'll have your answer. As the Apostle

Paul declares, *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ... and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

" ... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:11-13)

Notice how the incident of the complaining ends. *Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.* (Exodus 15:27)

Sounds like paradise in the middle of the desert! Do you think it was chance that brought them to this oasis where all their needs were met? Could it be that was God's

plan all along? The whole time they were grumbling, complaining that God had abandoned them, He was leading them to vacation in Palm Springs!

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly ... Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. (Romans 5:6-9)

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture ...

Give thanks to him; bless his name! For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.
(Psalm 100)