

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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9/30/07

Exodus 15:22-25; 16:1-8; 17:1-7 “Complain, Complain, Complain!”

Intro. One week after moving into his first apartment, Ed called his mother to complain about his neighbors: “One woman cries all day, another lies in bed moaning, and then there’s the guy who keeps banging his head against the wall.” “You better keep away from them,” she said. “I am. I stay inside all day playing my tuba.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes we complain about others, when the problem is with ourselves. Well, the Israelites did a lot of complaining about Moses, Aaron, & even God, but they failed to realize that *they* were the real problem. The heart of every problem is the problem in the heart.

Consider this: God had just brought about a mighty victory. He dealt a final crushing blow against Egypt, and delivered Israel from their power once and for all. They celebrated the Lord’s victory on the other side of the Red Sea. But then, it was time to move out toward Mt. Sinai, where they were to enter into a covenant relationship with God by receiving & obeying His law. Now I want you to notice with me v.22, “So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water.” They were following the pillar of cloud. They were right in the middle of God’s will, and yet the Lord led them through a desert. They went days without water. And when they finally found water, they also found disappointment. It was bitter. They couldn’t drink it.

There’s a lesson for us here. If you are a Christian, God has saved you from the bondage of sin, and He is leading you through the wilderness of this world to the Promised Land of heaven. As the old song says, “This world is not my home, I’m only passing through.” And you need to realize that even when you are right in the middle of God’s will, you will at times face times of difficulty and disappointment. There will be times when you go lacking. You will suffer losses along the way. Your plans can be torn up like a jigsaw puzzle. And just as it was with the Israelites, it’s not uncommon for great victory to be followed by trials and tribulations.

Now how should you respond when you go through your own wilderness experience? How should you respond when you face times of deprivation and disappointment? Our first reaction is often bewilderment. We ask, “Why?” But remember this: Every difficulty God permits us to encounter will become either a test that can make us better or a temptation that can make us worse. Our response will determine the outcome. So let’s look into our text for some answers regarding how we should respond to the trials of life so that we pass the test and become better and stronger, not worse. First of all:

## I. DON’T RESPOND WITH A COMPLAINING HEART

There was a disappointing pattern in Israel’s behavior during their march from Egypt to Canaan. As long as everything was going well, they usually obeyed the Lord and Moses and made progress. But whenever the going got tough, the Israelites began grumbling and talking about returning to Egypt. Last week we read their complaint in 14:11-12, where they said to Moses, “Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Owens in “Laughter, the Best Medicine,” *Readers’ Digest*, Oct. ‘07, 158.

wilderness? Why have you so dealt with us, to bring us up out of Egypt? “Is this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians?’ For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness.” When people complain, they usually see only the worst possible outcome. Well, they did not die. God saved them by parting the sea, and destroying the Egyptian army. Now, in our opening text today, we read in 15:24, “And the people complained against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’” They went 3 days in the desert without finding water. The harsh realities of a desert march really began to set in. Then when they finally did find water, it was bitter. They could not drink it. So they started singing the desert blues. They complained yet again. We would call them a bunch of grippers. Yet God came through yet again, and God provided a way to turn the bitter water into sweet drinkable water.

Surely, having just seen yet again God’s care for them, any more complaining and rebellion would be over, right? Wrong! Not long after that, the Israelites were at it again. In 16:2-3 we read, “Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the children of Israel said to them, ‘Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’” Once again, their complaints were unfounded. God soon provided bread from heaven, and even quail for meat. God demonstrated His goodness & grace yet again. Then in chapter 17, v.3 we read, “And the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses, and said, ‘Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’” About this time Moses was probably ready to turn his job over to somebody else. Had they already forgotten how the Lord provided for them in the past? Instead, they jumped the gun in their complaints. God soon provided water from a rock. So we have seen 4 examples of the complaints of the Israelites. And there are at least 5 other examples in the book of Numbers (11:1-35; 14:2, 27-29; 16:41; 17:1-10; cf. Deut. 1:27; Pss. 78:17ff, 106:14). It is interesting that the word translated “complained” is based on a word literally meaning “to lodge.” Even so, those who complain tend to “dwell” on their complaints.

However, before we criticize the Jews, perhaps we’d better examine our own hearts. How much disappointment or discomfort does it take to make us unhappy with the Lord’s will so that we stop believing and start complaining? The apostle Paul applies this problem to the church in 1 Cor. 10:10. In reference to the Israelites who complained in the desert, Paul said that we should not “complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.” The lesson to be learned from Israel’s rebellions in the desert is that the church should not follow their example. He also said in Php. 2:14-15, “Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”

I believe that the sin of complaining is one of the most prevalent sins among Christians. Christians complain about things that really do not amount to a hill of beans. If modern day Christians were living in the day of the early Israelites, they would complain that the land of milk and honey has too many calories and too much cholesterol! But Christians in America have even less to complain about. We have nice buildings, padded pews and padded chairs, air conditioning, and all kinds of conveniences. Yet many people today, instead of praying on their knees and going to homes to get people saved, are whining, fussing, and grumbling.

## II. UNDERSTAND THE CAUSES OF A COMPLAINING HEART

Complaining is a symptom of a number of spiritual problems. First of all, complaining is often caused by:

A. Unbelief – The Israelites complained because they did not believe that God would adequately provide for their needs. Complaining is a lack of faith in the goodness of God. Amazingly, it was also a lack of faith in the power of God. They thought their God had led them to a place where He couldn't care for them. Did the Israelites really think that they were being led out into the desert to die? What kind of God would do that? Unbelief is a serious sin against the character of God. And how many times did they have to see God work on their behalf before they would finally believe in Him?

The next time you complain, just stop & remember that you are problem expressing unbelief in the goodness of God, or in the ability of God to take care of you.

B. Self-centeredness - Uppermost in the minds of the Israelites wasn't how to please God but "What shall we eat?" and "What shall we drink?" All they could see was that their needs, right then and there, were not being met. All they could think about was themselves. Their complaints were clearly caused by self-centeredness.

While Israel was being self-centered, God wanted them to focus rather on His glory. Notice in 16:7 that Moses said "in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD..." They needed to get their eyes off themselves, and instead focus on the glory of their great God. Contemplate the glory of His goodness. Contemplate His glorious power. It isn't important that we're comfortable in life, but it is important that God is glorified.

All around us is the every-present temptation to see ourselves as the center of the universe. What we see on television in particular trains us to think that our perceived "needs" are to be met as quickly as possible. In fact, we are told that we have a right to those things. We feel that if we can just obtain more of the material things of life, we will finally be happy. And we complain when we fall short of expectations.

In contrast, Jesus said in Mt. 6:31-33, "do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." So the next time you complain, think about the fact that you are probably being like a self-centered child.

C. Pride – When we complain against the Lord and ask Him why bad things happen to us, we're assuming a superior posture and giving the impression that we're in charge and God is accountable to us. God is sovereign and doesn't have to explain anything to us unless He wants to. How prideful we are when we complain, and question God's dealings with us.

Furthermore, look down to chapter 17, v.7. Notice in the last part of the verse that "they tempted the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" They put the Lord to the test by demanding that He prove Himself by giving them water immediately upon demand.

So as you go through your own experience of deprivation and disappointment, don't let unbelief, self-centeredness, and pride cause you to complain against the Lord or the leaders of the church.

We see from 15:25 that hardships are times of testing (cf. 16:4; 20:20). Israel failed the test repeatedly. Will you fail the test the next time you go through a difficult time? Well I want you to pass the test, and allow God to build character in your life. So I want to conclude my message by encouraging you to do something else:

### III. ACCEPT THE CURE FOR A COMPLAINING HEART

You really don't want to be a complainer. God will be displeased with you. People will not want to be around you. Former football coach Lou Holtz said, "Don't tell your problems to people: 80% don't care and the other 20% are glad you have them."<sup>2</sup> You will grow old with a sour disposition. I would rather grow old with a gracious, sweet disposition. So what do we need to do to cure a complaining heart? First:

A. Remember, God Hears Your Complaints – In 16:7 Moses said, "And in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD; for He hears your complaints against the LORD." Then in the last part of the next verse, he also said, "...for the LORD hears your complaints which you make against Him. And what are we? Your complaints are not against us but against the LORD."

Have you ever complained about someone, and then realized that they have just walked up behind you and heard every word you said? How embarrassing? Well when you complain about this, and complain about that, God hears your complaints.

I believe it is clear from God's Word that God does not like griping, complaining, fault-finding Christians. The typical church is filled with complaining Christians. You should be very careful when you begin to gripe about things at church. Are you griping about the preacher because he is not as friendly as you think he ought to be, or because he did not shake hands with you last Sunday, or because he has not been around to visit you lately? Well come share your complaints with me. You say, "Oh, I wouldn't do that!" Well God hears your complaints. You might as well let the preacher hear them as well!

B. Repent of Improper Complaining – This is a right way to express what you see as a problem. There is a right way to correct problems and seek solutions. But as we have seen, just to whine and complain to your neighbor or fellow church member is a sin against God, and we will never stop as long as we are defending our actions. Some people say, "Well, I just believing in speaking my mind." Friend, not everything your mind thinks should be spoken. There's a lot of sin in the heart and mind of sinful man. That's why James chapter 3 talks about bridling our tongues.

So we need to repent of improper complaining.

Next:

C. Put Your Faith in God – If unbelief is one cause of a complaining heart, then faith in God is the cure. God led the Israelites to a desert place, where He was really their only hope. They thought about returning to Egypt, but their only viable option was to trust in God completely. After all, God had not only promised to deliver Israel from Egypt, but also give them the Land of Canaan. Surely that would also mean that He would provide for their needs along the way. God had clearly demonstrated His power in Egypt. Surely He could provide food and water even in the desert. They should have placed their faith in God to provide for their every need in

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<sup>2</sup> *Readers Digest*, March 06, page 101.

every situation. God clearly demonstrated His goodness and grace. In spite of their complaints and unbelief, He still provided for them again and again.<sup>3</sup> That's because God had made a promise to the Patriarchs, and His promise would not be thwarted by anyone. The God of Israel was worthy of their trust.

God is worthy of your trust as well. Your greatest need is not food for the body but forgiveness for your soul. And God provided that through His Son Jesus Christ. We see two pictures of that right here in our text. In chapter 15, v.25 the bitter water of Marah were turned sweet by a tree that God showed Moses. Even so, the bitter results of sin are removed by another tree. Jesus died on a tree, the cross of Calvary. He was made a curse in our place, that we might receive the blessing of the forgiveness of sin. He tasted the bitter cup of death for every man. Then in chapter 17 God told Moses to take some of the leaders of Israel to the rock in Horeb, and strike the rock with his staff, and water would flow from that rock. Well Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:4 that the rock is a type of Jesus Christ, who was smitten for us on the cross. And the waters that flowed from the rock is a picture of the Holy Spirit who is given to every believer (John 7:37-39). God not only gives us forgiveness through His Son, but also satisfaction & strength through His Spirit. And as a Father, He promises to provide for our every need. Again, God is worthy of your trust. So the next time you face a problem, don't complain. Trust God. He is greater than any problem you face. You can trust God to provide for your needs.

Have you been to the Rock, Jesus Christ, and received the living water that He offers? Have you placed your faith in Him for the forgiveness of sins?

D. Practice Contentment – Clearly, contentment is the opposite of complaining. And the Bible teaches that we should learn to be content in every situation. John the Baptist told the soldiers in Luke 3:14 that if they wanted to demonstrate that they had truly repented, they should be “content with your wages.” Paul said in Php. 4:11, “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.” He said in 1 Tim. 6:6, “Now godliness with contentment is great gain.” Then in the 8<sup>th</sup> verse he said, “And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.” Finally, Heb. 13:5 says, “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’”

Are you a content Christian or a complaining Christian? If you want to please God and others, you need to learn to be a content Christian.

Finally, another cure for a complaining heart is this:

E. Practice Thankfulness – You can focus your attention on your problems and complain. Or you can focus your attention on your blessings, and be thankful. God led the Israelites through a few days of difficulty in the desert, but it was soon followed by the refreshing oasis of “Elim, where there were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees.” God knows how to balance our trouble with times of refreshing. “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Ps. 30:5). Beyond every storm, there is a rainbow. Joseph spent time in prison, but in time he was delivered and exalted next to Pharaoh. Each time the Israelites were tempted to complain, they should have been thankful for the many times God had been good to them. He delivered them from Egyptian bondage. He miraculously provided for them again and again.

Even so, we ought to stop complaining, and start thanking God more. Some people live life with a whine, going through life complaining that the roses have thorns when they ought to

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<sup>3</sup> However, later in the Book of Numbers, God's forbearance comes to an end, and He judges their complaining, rebellious spirit.

be thankful that the thorns have roses. It's all a matter of cultivating a thankful heart. Gratitude is riches. Complaining is poverty. Instead of complaining about what's wrong, be grateful for what's right.<sup>4</sup>

Conclusion: Matthew Henry, the famous Bible teacher, was once accosted by thieves and robbed of all of his money. He wrote these words in his diary: "I am so very thankful. First, because I was never robbed before. Second, because although they took my purse they did not take my life. Third, because although they took everything I had, it wasn't very much. Fourth, it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed." Instead of complaining about his trials, he was thankful.

So the next time you experience a trial, a loss, or a disappointment, don't respond by complaining about it to God or to others. Just trust God to provide for you, and see you through that difficulty. Be content and thankful, and you will pass the test, please God, and be a blessing to others.

Sources: Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Stephen Felker, [\*Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible\*](#) (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2007; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus* (Colorado Spring: Chariot Victor Books Publishing, 1998). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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<sup>4</sup> Zachary Fisher.