



Trust and Complain

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95:6-11; John 4:5-42; Romans 5:1-11

Confidence is an issue of ongoing struggle. We question ourselves, we question the value of our actions, we question our impact on family, friends, society, and the world. We wonder how our lives can be of benefit to others, and where we stand in God's larger picture. We wonder how we can survive the storms and uncertainties of life. We wonder whether the foundations on which we build our lives are truly secure. When our confidence sinks to its lowest level, our complaints tend to sound their loudest. How can we find the needed security to trust God when anxiety makes it much easier to spread doubt, complaint, and distrust? Can trust overcome our fears?

The Exodus from Egypt was a powerful experience for the Hebrews. They suddenly gained new confidence, optimism, and hope. It was a hard-won confidence, however. When Pharaoh began pursuit, many were ready to turn back to the tried and true. When the chariots trapped them at the Sea of Reeds, many were ready to throw in the towel. When they reached the wilderness, they were ready to go back to the availability of Egyptian produce. When they found a dry land, they despaired for water. They complained. They whined. They grumbled. They blamed Moses. They blamed God. They were insecure with a future into which they could not see. Trust fled. Complaint, doubt, and fear took over.

It seems like a refrain in the generations of the Hebrew people. From one victory to the next, they forgot the faithful character of *Yahweh's* provision. They did not really understand that *Yahweh* could and would care for their needs. They struggled with the idea of trusting God beyond the limits of their grasp of the future. When everything was upbeat, it was simple to trust. They could trust when they did not have to. When they failed to see a way out—when trust and confidence were actually needed—that is when it failed. It failed, because it was never really there.

That was when God stepped in to test their claim of faith. It was in those experiences of doubt, fear, and uncertainty that the reality of God's faithfulness could shine through. It was in exercising faith that they could learn better to lay aside the symptoms of their insecurity and address the need to depend upon God. Their suffering produced a degree of endurance. It gave way to a measure of character, paving the way for hope—confidence in the faithful character of *Yahweh*.

Deep down, faith was a tenuous relationship with God. Life was uncertain. They claimed to be servants of *Yahweh*, but it was hard to really trust God. It was much easier to trust tangible resources, visible leaders, or simply complain, point fingers, and forget that dependence upon God is about our not being in control.

Nicodemus, like the Jewish leadership in general, was comfortable with the religious traditions and legalistic interpretations of Mosaic law. Jesus called him to a new dependence on God. He called us to place our full confidence in God's provision and faithful care, despite evidences of life's uncertainty. The Samaritans had their own traditions and interpretations on following God.

The Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerazim, the original site of the Promised Land on which an altar was to be built. While the Jews looked down on them for having intermarried with foreigners, they looked down on the Jews for worshipping in the wrong location. The struggle and enmity between Jews and Samaritans was a battle over competing traditions. It was a struggle to vindicate one's

righteousness at the expense of the other. Secondary matters became the focus of their discussion, and the driving force of their enmity.

Who was right was the center-stage concern between the two groups. The site of Solomon's temple argued waged battle over the site of the first altar to *Yahweh* after the Exodus. The question of pure genealogy battled with the tradition of faithful purity to following the Pentateuch. Arguments were about protecting ones tradition, rather than seeking resolution. Complaint and accusation against the other party overcame the important issue of serving God in faithfulness.

Jesus claimed both factions wrong and right. He also claimed they had all missed the boat. Serving God was not about whose tradition was better, superior, or more original. Serving God is not about tradition, anyway. It is not the place that matters. It is not the form that matters. It is not the medium that matters. It is rather the character of our service of worship that stands at the heart of the issue.

Technologies change. Languages change. Music styles change. Locations change. Buildings change, decay, and crumble. Issues, complaints, and attitudes move from one venue to the next. None of that is central to faithful worship. Worship, service, faith, are not about protecting our traditions and ways of behaving. They are about trust—confidence that we can dedicate our lives to fulfilling God's will despite our uncertainties, fears, and concerns.

The woman at Jacob's well was no fitting tool for the gospel in any tradition. She was a woman, for starters. She was one of those women, to boot. Her sordid sexual history was known. Her home life was a mess. She avoided people for the obvious reasons of reputation and the lack of respect she received in the local gossip column. To the Jews, she was a Samaritan. To the Samaritans, she was an outcast. Somehow, none of that fazed Jesus. He called this woman to faith, just as he called Nicodemus. She returned to Sychar with a mission and purpose.

She set aside about the standard objections, arguments, and issues of propriety, tradition, and custom. She ignored the enmity between her people and the Jews. She recognized that God was calling her in Jesus to a new venue of life. Complaints were forgotten for the moment. Mistreatment from her own town was set aside. Reputation, history, and rules of propriety were ignored. She had found something of much greater worth than any of that. She had found that God cared enough for her to come in the midst of her life crises with a message of confidence, faith, and hope. She set aside her fear and doubt to find a new confidence to carry her through.

It is much easier to maintain our uncertainties than to embark on a journey of faith. It is much easier to shoot down contrary opinions, traditions, and practices than it is to embrace the challenge of a life of confident faith in God. It is so much easier to question how we will survive an uncertain future than it is to trust that God is willing to care for our needs. It is more comfortable to stick with the tried and known than to allow God to pull us into uncharted waters.

The storms of life shake us up from time to time. The wind blows down trees that seem strong and healthy. Tornadoes destroy buildings we consider secure. Crises wipe out financial resources we believe sufficient. Technologies interrupt reliance on comfortable traditions. Will we trust God to carry us through uncertain times, or will we slip into the comfortable Hebrew tradition of complaint?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*