



Overcoming Complaint

Exodus 16:2-12; Ps 105:1-3,37-45; Mt 20:1-16; Phil 1:21-30

We like to complain. We especially like to complain in order to make the problems of life some nebulous other's fault. Too hot, too cold, too fast, too slow, too expensive, too cheap. I'm not being treated right. Life is not fair. Did you hear what they said to me? I can't believe how I was treated! Complaining is basic to human nature, but it is also a product of faith in crisis. We are most wont to complain when we feel most insecure, when we do not trust that our needs will be met. Can faith really help us overcome our drive to complain?

How quickly we forget. How quickly we move on from security to insecurity, from confidence to worry. How easily we equate God's available means to provide for us to the limited scope of what we can see, predict, and recognize. How quickly we limit God to the range of our own possibilities.

When the Hebrews were in Egypt, life was tough. They cried out to God for deliverance. They cried for help and release. We don't read of any complaining, grumbling, or griping. We read that *Yahweh* heard their cries and did something about them, sending Moses as the messenger for their deliverance. God intervened in their lives to bring them to a new level of faith.

Maybe that's where things went wrong. It seems that as soon as God began doing something about helping them they started to complain. They didn't want to be slaves in Egypt, but at least they lived in a predictable way. They knew what to expect. They didn't like it, but they felt somehow secure in the midst of their oppression. They were comfortable with their lives under oppression. When God began to change their circumstances, they became more and more uncomfortable. The complaining started in earnest.

"Moses, you are making things worse, not better!" "It's your fault that we now have to go collect our own straw!" "Look at this, now we have to work even harder than before!" "At least before you came along we could suffer our oppression in peace!" God brought them out of Egypt and they rejoiced for a while. Then they saw Pharaoh's army in pursuit. Then they saw the Sea of Reeds. They complained again and again and again. They complained that Moses never should have gotten involved. They complained that Moses had messed up their lives. They complained against Moses for bringing them to the wilderness to die at Pharaoh's hand.

Yahweh delivered them from Pharaoh once more. With the celebration over, the victory was forgotten. Their contentment did not last long. Three days after the songs of celebration, they were complaining again. Life was uncertain. They didn't know what to expect. They felt insecure. They did not know how to survive in this new terrain. They were free from the oppression in Egypt, but they also felt cut off from all they knew and had granted them any sense of security. Fear, uncertainty, anxiety, and insecurity gave way to complaint, grumbling, and discontentment.

"What will we drink?" "How will we survive?" "What will we eat?" "How will we face life's uncertainties?" "Why did you do this to us?" "We would have been better off without your messing up our lives!" "At least back in Egypt we had plenty to eat." "How will we make a living out here in the wilderness?" "What are we supposed to feed our children?" "Why did you do this to us?" "This is all your fault!"

God said, “Moses, they are not really complaining against you. They are complaining against me. They have not learned faith. They don’t trust me to provide for their needs. They need time and opportunity to learn trust.”

Isn’t that the way it runs normally? Our complaints say more about ourselves than they do about those against whom we rage and complain. They highlight our fears and insecurities much more than they describe the objects of our complaining. God chose to provide while the people complained still.

Instead of rejoicing in God’s provision and celebrating their new life, they drowned themselves in fear and anxiety. *Yahweh* was faithful. They were fearful and insecure. They had not learned trust.

The psalmist looked back and saw God’s blessing and provision. The psalmist saw in the story how God had met the people’s need at every step of the way. It is different, however, to look backward to see God’s provision than to trust God’s provision during the crises of our lives. We are better at recognizing how God provided for someone else than to expect God to supply our own needs.

We are more likely to worry over God’s provision for others than to see it as a demonstration of God’s generosity and grace. Like Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard, we are wont to complain that someone else seems to be getting a better deal than ourselves rather than recognizing and rejoicing in the extent of God’s grace, forgiveness, and redeeming love. Rather than allow demonstrations of God’s grace in others’ lives to fill us with greater confidence in God, we so easily slip into complaint. We worry that there might somehow not be enough grace to go around. We worry that we might be missing out on something that someone else experiences. We worry that in meeting the needs of others, God might forget about us.

Paul wrote that living is not supposed to be about ourselves, anyway. “For me to live is Christ,” he said. When Christ becomes our reason for living and purpose for living, complaint falls away. Paul says that life’s hardships are opportunities to join in Christ Jesus’ suffering. They are gateways to better understanding the depths of God’s love and grace. They are opportunities for us to become more like Christ Jesus and less like the complaining, distrustful Hebrews in the wilderness. They are opportunities for faith to grow, develop, and become reality greater than words expressed in the comfort of a Sunday morning service. It is a proclamation that regardless of my circumstances, God is faithful and will provide for us throughout eternity.

Death did not negate Paul’s faith in God’s provision. Death did not interfere with Paul’s certainty that trusting Christ Jesus as sufficient was worth all he had to give. Far beyond a life of complaint, Paul had learned to trust God with caring for him even in the midst of all sorts of adverse conditions. He might not know how God would provide for him next. He knew, however, that God would be faithful far beyond the limits of his own faithfulness.

Rather than complaint, Paul lived trust. Rather than grumbling, he shared hope. Rather than living in discontentment and discouragement, he chose to allow faith and confidence in Christ Jesus to direct his words and actions.

Complaint does not spring from circumstance, so much as from a lack of faith. What is our confidence in God like? Can the voice of faith overcome our spirit of complaint?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*