

ON EAGLES' WINGS VI. "Traveling Grumbles"

10-16-05
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Exodus 15:22-16:31

INTRODUCTION

I read about a sign in English in an Athens hotel that reads, "Visitors are expected to complain at the office between the hours of 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. daily." I expect that sign is one of those that lost something in translation! Most of us don't need to be told when to complain, and certainly don't do it on schedule. However, you may know some individuals who are that predictable. They come into work and you know their first words will be a complaint about something.

One such woman frequented a small shop. Every time she came in she complained about the prices, about the quality of the goods, and even about the location. The owners always received her graciously. One day, while she was ranting about things, she directed her verbal assault at a clerk saying, "Why is it I never manage to get what I ask for in your shop?" The clerk smiled and suggested, "Maybe because we're too polite?"

Most of us would probably confess to too much complaining. In our Scripture this morning, we find an uncomfortable identity with the Israelites. Paul, in 1 Cor. 10:10, uses them as an illustration of how we should not grumble. The words used to describe what we're talking about this morning are wonderfully onomatopoeic, that is, sounding like what they describe:

- "complain"—can't you hear the whine?
- "grumble"—you hear the rumble of discontent;
- "murmur"—you can hear the mumbling of dissatisfied people.

We'll pickup our Scripture reading in Exodus 15:22. The Israelites have just experienced the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, delivering them from the armies of Pharaoh. On the other side of the sea, Moses and his sister Miriam led God's people in a triumphant song of salvation in the first part of this chapter. It is now just three days later and (borrowing a sentence from my brother), "The song of salvation modulates into a murmuring drone."

Exodus 15:22-16:31

MARAH: The Bitter Made Sweet

Israel has escaped Egypt. But remember, from last week, God isn't taking them to the promised land by the direct route, "The Way of the Philistines," a well traveled road going east and then northeast from Egypt. That would have been a relatively easy journey. Instead they are heading south. Not only are they going in a direction they did not anticipate, they are headed right into formidable wilderness. Wilderness may not have the same connotation for you as it did then since today we have the back to the wilderness movement. Some people actually want to go and spend a serious amount of time in forbidding wilderness. But in that day, wilderness wasn't

attractive. For most people, it was the last place they would choose to be.

They are now 25 miles south of where they want to be, and things are already falling apart. They have a crisis— they are running out of water. But then, just in time, they arrive at a camping spot called Marah with plenty of water available. The word, “Marah,” means “bitter.” I expect some were wondering about the name until the first people took a drink of the water and began spitting it out. It was so brackish or full of sulphur or whatever it is that makes for bitter water that it was undrinkable. Now remember, during the last year, the Israelites have witnessed a series of ten horrible plagues devastating Egypt, yet experiencing God’s favor in protecting them from all but the first two. Just three days ago, they’ve seen the vast waters of the Red Sea form a wall of water on their right and on their left and walked through on dry ground. Yet does anyone say, as they confront this problem, “I just can’t wait to see what God will do now?” No. Instead, we read, *So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?”* (Ex 15:24).

Being a leader is tough, especially when you get a bunch of people blaming you for problems beyond anyone’s control. But Moses here models good Biblical leadership. He takes the grumbling of the people and cries out to the Lord— intercessory prayer. The Lord shows him what to do and the problem is solved. But then here is pure grace from the Lord. In spite of their grumbling and lousy attitude, He gives them a wonderfully assuring promise:

“If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.”
(Ex 15:26)

Isn’t that beautiful? Do you want to give a whiney kid an incredibly precious gift? You might grudgingly meet their needs, but with a lecture on attitude. But God recognizes they are frightened and though they are asking in an entirely wrong way, He gives them more than they could have even thought to ask for.

What a promise, *I am the LORD, who heals you*— an assurance that He is able to handle all their health concerns. That is still true for us today. We have the fuller expression in the healing ministry of Jesus.

The underlying question at Marah is, “Can the Israelites be turned from bitterness to sweetness?” The change God brings is not in moving them somewhere else to good water, but transforming the present bitter water into sweet water. That’s a divine alchemy He wants to work in all of our lives— changing things that would be bitter to most if us into something that is a sweet blessing from the Lord. You’ve heard the saying, “Trouble will either make you bitter or better.” The difference between “bitter” and “better” is the letter, “I.” The self-centered become bitter because the world does not suit them. When we relinquish our agendas to the Lord, letting Him be truly in control, the bitter experiences become an opportunity for growth— so much so that we even come to see them as a blessing.

A teenager complained to his father that most of the church hymns were boring, with tiresome tunes and meaningless words. His father said, “If you think you can write better hymns, then

why don't you?" Now I think we all have known people, or at least heard stories of them, who became bitter because of boring childhood church experiences. But, this teen accepted the challenge and went to his room and wrote his first hymn. The year was 1690 and the teen's name was Isaac Watts. Among the 350 hymns he wrote are "Joy to the World" and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." Interestingly, he also wrote a little known hymn with the title, "How Long, O Lord, Shall I Complain?" Isaac transformed what could have been an embittering thing into a fountain of sweet blessings for millions.

MANNA: Daily Trust

Now, we jump ahead about a month or six weeks and the supplies of food they brought along are running out. Again, is there a faith response saying, "The God who brought us through the Red Sea and made the bitter water sweet at Marah will surely provide for us again?" No. Instead, *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."* (Ex 16:2-3).

Now, if you were God, what would you be wanting to do about this point? It's a good thing we aren't given the chance to be God for a day. Instead we see amazing grace again as God rains down bread from heaven— a provision that will continue every single day for 40 years, until they enter the promised land and are able to eat the fruit of that land. That very day it ended (Josh. 5:12).

And, isn't it amazing how quickly we romanticize the past when the present going gets tough? The brutal slavery and the killing of their babies in Egypt are quickly forgotten and they are dreaming of the pots of meat they ate. They totally ignore the blessings the Lord has provided and begin longing for the predictable past. They are thinking, "It may have been tough in Egypt, but at least we knew where there next meal was coming from." Isn't that true of us as well? How quickly we lose sight of God's marvelous redemptive acts in our lives the minute difficulties come and begin to dream about how it was when we were in control, not needing to depend upon God.

Moses also makes a very important discovery here. While they are grumbling against him and Aaron, demanding they satisfy their needs and solve their problems, he figures out that they are really complaining against the Lord. In 16:8 he says, "*Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord.*" Moses has come to understand that the real issue is what God is or isn't doing in their lives. And here's an important insight I got from Dr. Craig Barnes, "Every complaint is a veiled longing to understand what God is doing in our lives." When you think about it, the things that irritate us, make us mad and prone to grumble are things beyond our control. That brings the bigger question then of, "Why isn't God then taking care of me better and making things work to suit me? I'm unhappy here, God. Do something about it!"

Here, Barnes observes that manna is the perfect metaphor for what is going on, for "manna" means, "What is it?" Every morning they eat a bowl of "what is it?" I expect they had boiled

manna, fried manna, barbecued manna, baked manna, and maybe even manna-cotti (as John Ortberg suggests). At the same time, as they are eating their “what is it?,” they are reminded of God’s supernatural involvement in their everyday lives.

When life is not working the way we’d like, we usually begin with the question, “What am I supposed to do?” It is not the right question, but it is where we begin. Behind every complaint is, “What is it I need you to do for me?” We live in a world preoccupied with self. We are immersed in my needs, my hungers, my money, my problems at work, and endless other “mys.” When things go wrong, we cry out, “Why is this happening to me?” Everything seems like a conspiracy to mess up my life.

As Dr. Barnes points out, by the time he gets to church on Sunday morning, he is sick and tired of “me.” He is ready to hear of someone who has a better story going on than he does. This is why worship doesn’t bear the burden of relevance. Worship should not be made relevant to us. It is about our becoming relevant to worship and the wonderful story of salvation. Things didn’t begin with us. The great chapters begin with, “In the beginning God...” (Gen. 1:1) and “In the beginning was the Word...” (Jn. 1:1). That’s also why we have older, traditional things in worship. To stand and recite a creed, as we did this morning, is totally counter-cultural. You can imagine the response of our American culture who isn’t familiar with this. “You mean you believe something you didn’t write— something that’s not yours? You affirm something you didn’t come up with as your own personal mission statement on retreat last week?” Yes indeed, because we need to be reminded it is not about us. It is all about God and His purposes for us and our world.

This story we present each week in church has better questions than the ones we’re asking. The right question is not, “How do I find a relationship to cure my loneliness?” or “How do I find the right job so I’ll be happy?” The right question is not what you’re complaining about. The right question is, “What is God doing?” It is the manna question, “What is it, Lord, that You want in this?” Every problem we face, every disappointment, everything for which we feel like voicing a complaint is actually an invitation to discover afresh what it is that the Lord is up to. It is an invitation to enter into His greater story of salvation. There, the trials, testings, and troubles all become part of a magnificent plan transforming us into the glory of Christ. James expresses it well,

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4).

Do you want to be a mature Christian, complete, not lacking anything? The road to maturity is through those very things that often elicit complaint from us. When we give into complaining, we are revealing a lack of faith. We are assuming the current circumstances are more powerful than God’s plan and purpose for our lives.

I’ve read that turkeys and eagles react quite differently to storms. A turkey hides under the barn. An eagle leaves the security of its nest and spreads its wings to ride the air currents, knowing it will carry it higher than it could ever soar on its own. This is true of the storms of life. We want

the attitude of an eagle, not a turkey. We can gain strength from the storm.

Actor Andy Griffith understands that principle as he talks about his battle with Guillain-Barre syndrome. This is a nerve-affecting disease that can cause serious paralysis. He says, "I firmly believe that in every situation, no matter how difficult, God extends grace greater than the hardship, and strength and peace of mind that can lead us to a place higher than we were before."

Our grumbling not only short-circuits the benefit we can receive from adversity, it is also highly destructive to the community. It is interesting that St. Benedict's rule book for people living in monasteries levels its sharpest criticism at complainers. There is a good reason for that, for complaining can drain all joy from a community. Haven't you noticed how contagious it is? One person starts griping and soon others join. You may not have been upset at all, but soon find yourself drawn into the gripe session and you start to see more and more problems with the way things are. You leave that group feeling negative and discouraged.

In our Scripture, careful instructions are given regarding the gathering and keeping of manna. Everyone was to gather according to their need, but not keep any for the next day. Each day it was provided. Those who hoarded it over, not trusting the Word of the Lord, had a stinking, maggot-filled mess the next day. However, another miracle happened every Sabbath. The day before they were to gather double the amount they needed since they were to rest on the Sabbath and no manna would be given that day. For that day only, the manna wouldn't spoil.

This becomes a model of daily trust and dependence upon God's provision. He gives strength for each day, yet nothing is to be saved up and hoarded in the spiritual life. What God blesses us with, we need to pass on. Share it or it will rot within us producing stinking self-righteousness. As Jeremiah writes,

*...for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness. (Lam 3:22-23)*

CONCLUSION

To the great manna question, "What is it?," Jesus is the final answer. Listen to His words in John 6:32-35:

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

Every murmur of discontent in our lives has its answer in Jesus. All that we really hunger and thirst for are in Him. All our questions about what is really going on find a place in His salvation

story of which we are a part. Come to Jesus.

How often we miss the daily miracles– the manna every day. How many things we take for granted. God totally provided for His people through supernatural means for 40 years. They were cared for so well that Moses reminds them in his final sermon, even their clothes didn't wear out or their feet swell from their travels (Deut. 8:4). Don't overlook for what God is doing just because it is so daily, so ordinary.

Our closing hymn, "Count Your Blessings," reminds us of a good way to get over the grumbles. Even if you're where you don't want to be and even if the waters seem impossibly bitter, God is able to turn it into a place of rich blessing for us as we surrender it all to Him.

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Questions for Small Groups

ON EAGLES' WINGS, VI. "Traveling Grumbles" For Further Study and Reflection from Sermon 10-16-05

Scripture: Exodus 15:22-16:31

1. Is there something in this sermon that seems particularly applicable to your life now?
2. In Ex. 15:25-26 and 16:4 it says God tested the Israelites. What is this test about? What things is God wanting them to do? And, are these still things God wants of us today?
3. Can you think of a time when you were experiencing something that could have made you bitter, but through God's grace it was transformed into blessing?
4. In Ex. 16:8, Moses tells the people that their grumblings are really against God, not Moses. When we grumble about our circumstances, do you think it is really a veiled complaint against God? Why do you think that?

5. Think about these verses:

1 Pet. 4:9, *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*

James 5:9, *Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!*

Phil. 2:14, *Do everything without complaining or arguing.*

Can you think of instances when you were in a complaining mode? What happened? Did the grumbling make you feel better or worse?

6. What are some things you can do next time you find yourself being overly critical and too complaining?

7. Do you consider grumbling a minor flaw, a sin, or somewhere in-between? Why?

How do you think God views it? (Read Num. 14:26-29)

8. Can you relate to Moses when the people complain to him about things over which he has no control? When you are unjustly accused, do you react as Moses did in Ex. 15:25?