

Adventures in the Wilderness: Complaints and More Complaints

Numbers 11 (selected verses); Ps. 13; Phil. 2:14, 15 7/19/20

One of the things that was very hard for me to deal with when we still had kids at home was their whining. I often wondered how they could be so creative in finding such a wide range of things to complain about! And, kids aren't the only ones! As I've talked with leaders in schools, businesses, government, and churches, a common concern I hear is how to deal with whining! For some people, whining becomes a way of life, a habit where they dump their own unhappiness on those around them! Many of us know the scourge of whining!

As we continue our series on the journey of the Hebrew people through the desert wilderness to the Promised Land of Canaan, we regularly run into the complaints and whining of the people. In Numbers 11, it has to do with manna. You'll recall that in response to their earlier complaints, God had decided to graciously provide his people with food each day. It was called manna, a flaky substance that appeared each morning on the ground. The people would gather it up and prepare it for that day, because it wouldn't keep overnight. God was literally providing for them one day at a time.

But, as you might guess, after a while the people became bored with it. You might imagine a conversation like this:

“Mom, what’s for dinner?”

“We’re having manna soup tonight!”

“Aw, Mom! We had manna pancakes for breakfast, and grilled manna sandwiches for lunch. Do we at least get a good dessert?”

“Of course, dear. Bamanna bread!”

Well, that’s the way I imagine it, but listen to what we actually find in Numbers 11. ⁴*The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat!* ⁵*We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic;* ⁶*but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”* (Num. 11:4-6)

In essence they were saying, “We might have been slaves, but at least back in Egypt we could order out from Pyramid Pizza!” In the wilderness God had graciously provided the daily manna to his people. They did nothing to earn it; It was simply an act of kindness on God’s part. Rather than expressing gratitude for God’s provision, they whined to Moses. And he was not pleased. And then he gets into the complaining act! ¹⁰*Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased.* ¹¹*So Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you treated your*

servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹²Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? ¹³Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ ¹⁴I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.” (Num. 11:10-15)

Now Moses complains to God about the people God has entrusted to him. He says, “God, you gave birth to this nation, but now you expect me to raise all these brats! I’m done!” God isn’t pleased with any of this. But he does two things in response. First, he spreads out his Spirit on other leaders in Israel to share the load with Moses. Second, he answers their request for meat. God said, ¹⁸*And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the LORD, saying, ‘If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt.’ Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, ²⁰but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you—because you have rejected the LORD who*

is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" (Num. 11:18-20)

And that's exactly what God did. He caused a wind to blow in from the sea, bringing huge flocks of quail, which fell exhausted all around the camp several feet deep! And they did indeed get sick of it!

But, was the whining of the Hebrews really so bad? After all, they were living in very difficult circumstances, out in a dry desert wilderness for years. We'd probably complain, too! But here was the problem with their whining. First, the complaints of the Hebrews were bereft of gratitude. There was no sense of thankfulness to God for delivering them from the drudgery, torture, and oppression of slavery in Egypt, for saving them from Pharaoh's army, and for sustaining and protecting them thus far in the wilderness. Gratitude is the foundational practice of spirituality and a healthy relationship with God. It recognizes that we are fully dependent upon God as his creatures. The Hebrews had forgotten to be grateful.

And, they rejected the work God was doing among them. That's what verse 20 says. God had a plan for these people, the descendants of Abraham. He was going to make a great nation of them, give them their own land, and bless the whole world through them. In order for that to happen, they had to leave Egypt and pass through the wilderness. But they rejected God's plan by longing to return to Egypt! That's the second

thing that was wrong with their complaint; They rejected God's plan for them, unable to see past their present discomfort in order to trust that God knew what he was doing. Instead, they complained. And the Bible condemns that kind of whining, as Paul writes in Phil. 2. *"Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish..."* (Phil. 2:14-15a)

In spite of the biblical warnings, complaining is still a problem for us, isn't it? A few years ago, journalist James Glassman declared that a "culture of complaint" has infected American society. That's a pretty good description. We are one of the wealthiest countries in the world; until recently enjoying full employment, relative peace and prosperity, clean water, and good educational opportunities. Yet we manufacture grievance after grievance and complaint after complaint rather than living lives of gratitude. And God hates that!

So, complaining without gratitude, and rejecting God's work among us is out of bounds. But are there ever times we can bring our pain and suffering to the Lord? And, are there respectful ways in which we can do so? Yes! Look at Ps. 13.

¹How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

²How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³Consider and answer me, O LORD my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, ⁴and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

⁶I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me. (Ps. 13:1-6)

Ps. 13 is one of many Psalms of Complaint or Lament. This one is a personal complaint to God by David. We don't know the circumstances, but verse 3 implies that he might have been very ill or injured. He begins by clearly stating his complaint. He feels like God has abandoned him and he is all alone even as his enemies harrass him. But David shows confidence that God will hear him, referring to the Lord as "my God." He still has faith in the goodness of God and power of God to rescue him, but he doesn't understand where God is, and why God hasn't acted.

Some of you can relate to this complaint of David. Maybe you've had a prolonged illness, or been in a bad marriage for many years, or been without work for a while, or in a job that is unfulfilling and maybe even toxic,

or maybe you've just been stuck at home, isolated and lonely, for months during this pandemic. You know what it's like to suffer and feel like God isn't hearing you or at least isn't answering you. In the Psalm, David shows us that it's OK to voice those things to God. There's no need to hold back; God already knows how you feel!

In contrast to the complaints of the itinerant Hebrews, the Psalmist expresses his faith and hope in God in the midst of his confusion. *"But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me."* (Ps. 13:5,6)

That kind of faith doesn't just pop out of nowhere. It has been nurtured and developed by a life of prayer and study and fellowship and worship. So, that's a good place to start- making use of those means of grace, those spiritual disciplines that God has given to us. Then, when things are going badly for us, and we don't have the means to fix them, then we can turn to the Lord, expressing our fears and our pain, trusting that God will hear us and respond at the right time and in the right way.

So, feel free to bring your deepest concerns and feelings to the Lord, like the Psalmist did. But don't forget to be grateful for God's blessings at the same time. And don't forget the ways God has taken care of you in the past. God is still at work in your life and has not forgotten you!