

“Complain, Complain, Complain”

Numbers 11:1-6 ¹

Every year, all around the world, hundreds of thousands of letters are addressed simply to God or to Jesus, and many of them end up in Jerusalem. Post Office spokesman Yitzhak Rabihiya said that one Israeli man asked God for 5,000 shekels (about \$1,000) to ease his poverty. Postal workers were so moved by the letter that they took up a collection among themselves and sent the man 4,300 shekels. Several weeks later the man wrote to God again: “Thank you, God, for your gift, but next time, please don’t send it through the Post Office. They’re thieves. They stole 700 shekels.”²

Such complaining is not just “far, far away.” It really seems as though a “culture of complaint” has infected us here in the U.S. as well. And not only do we complain, but we sue each other for everything. McDonald’s has been successfully sued because their coffee was too hot. People are suing fast food restaurants because the food makes them fat! People in debt have sued banks for lending them money even though they were credit risks. And there is no end to such foolishness.³

Nor is the church exempt. As folks gathered for a controversial business meeting at one church, someone asked Bill how he thought the vote would go. Bill thought a moment and replied, “Well, I don’t know. But I do know this—either way it goes, I’m going to be mighty bitter.”

You’ve probably heard about the man stranded for years alone on a desert island. The crew who finally rescued him noticed three huts on the island, and asked him what they were. “Well, that first hut is my house, and the next one is my church.” “What’s the third hut?” “That’s where I used to go to church.”⁴

Or how about this? Here are actual responses from comment cards turned in at the Bridger Wilderness Area in Wyoming in some years ago:

- The trails need to be wider so people can walk while holding hands.
- Please avoid building trails that go uphill.
- There are too many bugs and leeches, spiders and spider webs.
Please spray the wilderness to rid the areas of these pests.
- Please install chair lifts so we can get to the beautiful views without hiking to them.
- The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake.
Please get rid of them.
- The places where trails do not exist are not well marked.
- There are too many rocks in the mountains.⁵

This wilderness complaining sets the stage for us as we consider the idea of complaining this morning. After Moses led Israel through great walls of water in the Red Sea, *they moved out into the Shur Desert. They traveled in this desert for three days without water. When they came to Marah, they finally found water. But the people couldn’t drink it because it was bitter. . . . Then the people turned against Moses. “What are we going to drink?” they demanded (Exodus 15:22-24).*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 30, 2019.

² *The London Times*, October 4, 2003.

³ James K. Glassman, “Whine, the Beloved Country!”
www.taemag.com/issues/articleid.18007/article_detail.asp.

⁴ *Mikey’s Funnies*, August 20, 2003.

⁵ Mike Neifert, *Light and Life* (February 1997), p. 27.

Then the foreign rabble who were traveling with the Israelites began to crave the good things of Egypt, and the people of Israel also began to complain. "Oh, for some meat!" they exclaimed. "We remember all the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic that we wanted. But now our appetites are gone, and day after day we have nothing to eat but this manna!" (Numbers 11:4-6).

The people of Israel whined in the wilderness because they had no water. They whined because they had no meat. They whined because they had to eat manna.

The thing that amazes me about this is that the whining began only three days after the amazing and miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. Just think! The people walk through the middle of the Sea on Saturday, with walls of water standing on each side, and on Tuesday, they're attacking Moses because they can't find any drinking water in the desert.

Now I can understand the desire for water after three days in the wilderness, but it's hard to understand why the people turned to whining and complaining instead of asking their wonder-working God for help. I guess one way to understand this is that whining and complaining come pretty naturally to us, and I suspect that every one of us has sat "in the whiner's seat" more than once along the way. As one writer put it, "The person with the discontented heart has the attitude that everything he does for God is too much, and everything God does for him is too little."⁶

We humans are pretty good at whining. Adam and Eve whined to God in the Garden of Eden, and biblical whining is by no means limited to the Old Testament. The Church was only months old when, *as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. Those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food* (Acts 6:1).

Whining and complaining can be a temporary condition, but they can also become a way of life. As one painfully current example, it seems to me that no matter which of our national political parties is in power, the other party seems to give up the high road of being "the loyal opposition" and simply whines and complains and obstructs without offering much that is constructive.

The book of James begins with a very important principle that bears on this subject: "*Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything*" (James 1:2-4).

Did you notice that James didn't write "if trouble comes your way." He wrote "whenever trouble comes your way." Again and again, the New Testament reminds us that God's primary purpose in our lives is to shape our character into the character of Christ, and much of that shaping comes through trouble, suffering and pain. As John Ortberg put it, "It's not about the 'if'; it's about the 'when.'"

To put this differently, *it just might be that **you and I are tempted to whine and complain precisely in those times when and about those things where God is most at work in our lives.** And our complaining means that we've lost sight of the connection between our circumstances and God's activity.*

The greatest spiritual growth you and I experience often comes through anguish, suffering, pain. Quaker author Richard Foster calls this "the principle of indirection." That is, God

⁶ Don Kistler, *Tabletalk*, (9-18-01), p.15.

produces the Fruit of the Spirit in us by placing us in situations where it is easier to act in opposite ways. When we choose the good, our endurance has a chance to grow.

Please take out the insert in your worship order that is entitled “Spiritual Questions.” What you see there are the nine characteristics God is trying to work into your life (the Fruit of the Spirit) and the seven characteristics God is trying to remove from your life (the Seven Deadly Sins). I invite you to score yourself on each one as I give you an example of how to think about it.

Either now or later, I invite you to put a mark on each scale where you judge yourself to be at the moment with each character quality. Then put an arrow—a vector—from that spot in the direction that you think you’re moving, i.e., toward more or less of that quality. And let the length of that arrow represent how quickly you’re moving in that direction. Let’s look at the sins first, then at the virtues

- **Anger:** Think about the last time you were aware of feeling angry. Did you control your anger, or did your anger control you?
- **Envy:** Think about the last time you were envious of someone else’s position, job, house, car, clothes, or success. What did you do with that thought?
- **Gluttony:** Think about your last meal and your most recent experience at a buffet. How did you handle those situations?
- **Greed:** Think about the last time you wanted to buy another of or some more of something that you already have too much of or too many of. What did you do? How much have you given to God this year, compared to what you’ve spent on yourself?
- **Lust:** Think about the last time you were aware of sexual desire or interest toward someone who is not your mate. How long did you entertain those thoughts? What did you do with them?
- **Pride:** Think about your most recent accomplishment for which you could justifiably feel proud. To what extent were you/are you able to attribute that accomplishment to the investment other people have made in your life? To God’s gifts and work in your life?
- **Sloth:** How many hours of television did you watch this week? How many hours on *Facebook*? How many chores are undone at your house? How many projects are you avoiding at work?

How are you doing so far? Here’s another chance!

- **Love:** Think about something someone did this week that hurt you in some way. To what extent were you/are you able to give that person the benefit of the doubt, to enter into her frame of reference, and to act in ways meant to benefit him?
- **Joy:** Think about your most recent experience of discouragement. To what extent were you/are you able to avoid whining and complaining, choosing to remember God’s blessings that lie over, under, around and beyond your present circumstances?
- **Peace:** Think about your most recent crisis, whether major or minor. To what extent were you/are you able to experience God’s peace that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7), even in the middle of the storm?

- **Patience:** Think about your most recent experience of standing in a long grocery line or driving behind a really slow driver. To what extent were you able to relax and enjoy the gift of a slower pace?
- **Kindness:** Think about the last time you had an opportunity to get back at someone who had been unkind to you. What did you do?
- **Goodness:** Think about the last time you were tempted to do something you knew was wrong. What did you do?
- **Faithfulness:** Think about the last time you found it inconvenient to fulfill a commitment you had said you would do. What did you do?
- **Gentleness:** Think about the last time you had occasion to correct an employee or a family member. How did you handle that?
- **Self-Control:** Think about the last time you faced the temptation to which you are most in bondage. What happened?

Do you begin to see that those things in your life about which you're most inclined to whine or complain may very well be the very areas in which God is trying to shape your character? That's why James wrote, "*Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything*" (James 1:2-4).

Paul wrote to the Philippians that "*In everything you do, stay away from complaining and arguing, so that no one can speak a word of blame against you. You are to live clean, innocent lives as children of God in a dark world full of crooked and perverse people. Let your lives shine brightly before them*" (Philippians 2:14-15).

The interesting thing about all this is that the principle of indirection means that these changes in our lives don't happen by our trying to make them happen. These changes happen almost without our noticing them if we're truly in love with God. Little by little, being in deep and meaningful relationship with our Creator changes us from the inside out.

To put a different spin on an old story, a missionary visited a place where he had worked some years previously and asked an old saint how the spiritual journey was going. The man responded, "Well, it's like there are two dogs in me, one a good dog, an encouraging dog, and the other a bad dog, a whining and complaining dog; and it seems that they're always fighting. And the bad dog wins as often as not."

The missionary thought about this for a moment before asking, "Which dog are you feeding?" And to bring that story into the room, which dog are YOU feeding?

God's word to us is that we "*rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus*" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

So do the people who know you best think of you as an encourager or as a complainer? Do you move through life "somehow" or do you face each day **triumphantly**, by God's grace? And what do you think God wants you to do NOW?

Spiritual Questions

Please rate yourself in the following areas.

The first nine areas are the "*Fruit of the Spirit.*" The last seven areas are the "*Seven Deadly Sins.*"

Love absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Joy absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Peace absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Patience absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Kindness absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Goodness absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Faithfulness absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Gentleness absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Self-Control absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete



Anger absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Envy absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Gluttony absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Greed absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Lust absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Pride absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete

Sloth absent 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 complete