

Follow the Prophet Jeremiah's Response to This Deadly Sin

One of the recurring themes of the Bible is the tendency of the human heart to complain, either to others or to God. One is unacceptable; the other can be helpful. Let's explore the nature of complaining and when it is acceptable, when it is not.

The Descriptions of Complaining

Complaining is defined as "the expression of a grievance or displeasure, usually against the actions and attitudes of others, including God himself." Complaint appears too often in the Bible to document it all here. Some more notable instances would include Moses complaining to the Lord about the plight of the Israelites under Pharaoh (Ex. 5:22-23), then later about the burden of leading the people in the wilderness. We find instances of the Israelites complaining against Moses and Aaron (and God) in the wilderness when they doubted or disliked God's provision for them (Ex. 5:21, 14:11-12, 15:23-24, 16:2-3, 17:2-3; Num. 11:1-10, 33; 14; 16:41; 20:2-5; 21:5-6; Deuteronomy 1:27-28, Ps. 106:24-26). Jeremiah complained to the Lord about his miserable calling and the treatment he received from the people (Jer. 15:10; 20:14-18; Lamentations 3). Martha complained about her sister Mary's failure to help in the kitchen (Luke 10:14). False teachers are called "grumblers" and "malcontents" (Jude 16).

Yet, the New Testament is clear: "Do all things without murmuring and disputing, that you may be blameless and harmless, sons of God, without fault, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:14-15). James 5:9 commands, "Do not grumble against one another."

The Source of Complaining

Disappointment: A disappointed heart frequently manifests in a complaining tongue. Disappointment has several facets:

- With God, because He did not perform according to our often-flawed understanding of His ways.
- With others, because they did not meet the expectations we established for them in serving our needs.
- With circumstances, because a situation has not fulfilled some self-determined desire for our life.
- With ourselves, because we did not measure up to some subjective standard we had established.

Comparison: Not all comparison is bad. Sometimes we can see the difficulty of another and feel humbled because our life is blessed by undeserved grace. Too often, pride drives comparison. When others seem lesser in some way we can gloat in our superiority. When we compare unfavorably, we can wallow in self-pity. Our ailing and self-centered heart eventually manifests in complaint.

Ingratitude: When we doubt or disregard the goodness, faithfulness, and provision of God, our hearts become ungrateful. Flowing from the reality of that heart condition, complaint eventually surfaces. Discontent, dissatisfaction, and a disagreeable outlook are inevitable.

The Results of Complaining

Others are infected: Complaining can beget more complaining. It can be a communicable spiritual disease. It slowly drains the peace and gratitude from a situation or relationship.

Testimony is damaged: A complaining lifestyle is the evidence of attitudes and ambitions that are not under the control of the Holy Spirit. Few things can damage a godly testimony before one's family, friends, work associates, and unsaved acquaintances more effectively than complaining.

Others are repulsed: As a result, a complainer can soon become isolated from others who are trying to maintain a wholesome outlook on life. No one who is seeking to cultivate joy, gratitude, and positive progress in life enjoys being around a complainer.

The Antidote for Complaining

Turn to the Lord: Let's be honest. We are all bombarded with challenging circumstances. Disappointments can undermine our joy. Comparison can leave us feeling defeated. Ingratitude can rise up in any heart. But the answer is not to spew against others or onto innocent bystanders. We must turn to God in honest confession of our feelings and surrender of our troubled heart. Only He can give us a transformational attitude adjustment.

Take it to the Lord: When we unmask our complaints before God we are less prone to unload our complaints on others. Many of the biblical figures poured out the negative content of their hearts to God. The Lord already knows the complaints of your heart and only He can help you sort them out. In Psalms 3, 6, 12, 13, 22, 44, 57, 60, 74, 79, 80, 85, 88, 90 and 139, we find instances of "lament" as the writers expressed despair, anger, protest or doubt in response to difficult situations. D.A. Carson has noted, "There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God's people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but to a faith so robust it wrestles with God." So, we must also "wrestle with God" in our prayers, our Bible reading, our journaling and our weeping. This is the proper venting and vetting of our complaints.

Trust in the Lord: As happens in almost all of the psalms of lament, the writer's solution is to embrace fresh trust in the Lord. We, too, must renew our mind, will and emotions in the truths of God's goodness, providence, power, grace, mercy,

compassion, lovingkindness and faithfulness. We can trust the truth of who He is with all our hearts and not lean on our own understanding (Prov. 3:5-6). This must be a daily and even moment-by-moment resolve.

From Complaint to Conquest

One of the most notable and raw biblical examples of turning complaint into trust is found in Lamentations 3. I strongly encourage you to read it. The prophet is unhinged in expressing his complaints and consternation before God. As a result, he admits, "Surely my soul remembers and is humbled within me" (v. 20). Then, after surrendering his gut-wrenching complaint, he chooses to trust the Lord (vv. 21-26):

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed; His compassions do not fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in Him." The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that a man should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

If you struggle today with a complaining spirit, make this your daily resolve. Complaining will subside. Hope will abound. Joy will return. Relationships will improve. Christ will be honored. {eo}

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