
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

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The Cost of Complaining

“The whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron in the desert. ‘Who are we? Your complaints aren’t against us but against the Lord.’”

Exodus 16:2 (Common English Bible)

Frederick Douglas wrote, “Man’s greatness consists in his ability to do and the proper application of his powers to things needful to be done.” What Douglas speaks of may be called the claim of positive action – the decision to meet all circumstances not with a negative spirit, but with a positive mind and a useful response. When we meet disruptions in life, little inconveniences and seeming disorder of daily rhythms, it is good to remind ourselves that complaining doesn’t improve the situation. What complaining does accomplish is damage – damage to us and to those who must hear our complaints.

This damage is seen in the people of Israel. After leaving their captivity in Egypt, life along their journey through the wilderness becomes difficult. Food is scarce, as is water, and the people complained about the hot days and the cold nights. Their whimpering and complaining eventually became directed against their magnificent leader, Moses, who had faced Pharaoh squarely on their behalf, and secured their release from slavery. Memory of a difficult, even cruel, life in Egypt as slaves faded as they exaggerated the comforts they once enjoyed under Pharaoh. Under the cloud of complaining, their future as a free people grew dim. The great vision of liberty was surrendered to a past not rightly seen.

To this miserable and confused state Moses said, “Your complaints aren’t against us but against the Lord.” Now that is insight worthy of our best reflection! Often complaints arise from a sense that we have been treated unfairly or a belief that life has been unreasonably difficult. Someone or some circumstance is the blame for a life that is less than what we might have. But tell us that our complaint is against God and we may be forced to consider that God never really promised the ease we feel entitled to. Perhaps, God has placed each of us into a world where there are heavy loads to bear and difficulties that demand our best energies, both mind and body. Some reading this may remember the song lyric of decades ago, “I never promised you a rose garden.” God didn’t.

Complaining doesn’t solve anything. And most agree that complaining is a sign of mental and moral immaturity. Complaining brings nothing of value to the table of life. But complaining does exact a heavy cost. It diminishes a clear view of the presence and activity of God in our lives and it sends friends and acquaintances running – in the opposite direction. What remains is to develop a mental attitude that says, “This is the way things are right now. Where can I see God in this? And what positive response can I make?” It is this new mindset that finally moved Israel out of the desert and into God’s promised land.

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