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Discontentment

Exodus 16:1-14

As we go about building a Christian culture here at church, we have said that we need to be transformed by the renewing of our thinking. And that renewed thinking is to be informed by the Bible, not culture. We have also said that we want to commit ourselves as individuals and as a church to consciously and intentionally live our lives in the presence of God.

One of the attitudes we have come to think of as acceptable is complaining. We almost consider it a God-given right to complain when things are not going our way. However true that may be in our culture, and as common as it is even among Christians, the Bible says that complaining is a sin that God doesn't take too kindly to.

One of the hindrances of our coming to see complaining as a sin is that everybody does it. And some seem to get what they want when they complain. When we see that these people often get what they want when they complain, we are tempted to start complaining as well. But that can backfire as well.

On reaching his plane seat, a man was surprised to find himself seated next to a parrot strapped into the seat next to him. The flight attendant asked them what they wanted. The man politely responded that he would like a cup of coffee. The parrot said to the stewardess, "Get me scotch and soda you cow." The attendant got flustered and ran back with the parrot's drink. She was so flustered she forgot the man's coffee.

In a couple of minutes, the man politely reminded the attendant that she forgot his coffee. As he was talking the parrot interrupted and said, "Hey bimbo, get me a refill." Again, the attendant was so distraught, she ran to get the drink and she again she got the drink and forgot to bring the guy's coffee.

Unaccustomed to such lack of service, the man decides to try the parrot's method. He called for the attendant and said, "Look you ugly freak, bring a coffee and bring it right now."

The attendant ran back into the galley and soon, two burly male flight attendants appeared. They grabbed both the parrot and the man, opened the emergency door and threw them both out. As they descended the parrot said to the man, "For a guy who can't fly, you complain too much."

When we complain we need to understand that in reality we are accusing God of either not knowing what He is doing, or that He is powerless to help us, or that He doesn't love us. That's just as stupid as the guy who was thrown out of the plane.

When things start to go badly for you, how do you respond? I think that when we are disappointed by people or situations, we find it natural to complain. We complain when we face financial setbacks. We complain when we suffer physical ailments. We complain when we don't get what we want. And we especially complain if others have what we don't have. I have always read this morning's passage and criticized the Hebrews for complaining especially given

the context. In other words, God had just delivered them from brutal slavery, set them free, and gathered them together as His specially chosen people. And just 6 weeks into the journey, they start complaining.

However, when I examine my life and start to see the things I have complained about, grumbled about, and stewed about, I have to say that I am no different than the Hebrews in this morning's text.

Now that I think about what complaining really is, I find myself ashamed, especially when I consider what God has already done for me. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **WHEN WE COMPLAIN AND ARE NOT CONTENT WE ARE ACTUALLY ACCUSING GOD OF NOT LOVING US.**

The Bible is clear that God promises to be with us in all situations. The Bible also promises we will face all sorts of trials and tribulations. And the Bible is clear about these truths concerning the nature of God. He loves us. He is all-powerful. He is all-knowing. He is ever-present. Jesus said that not even an insignificant event as a sparrow falling from the sky happens without God's permission. And let me quote two statements from Paul's letter to the Romans:

²⁸And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

³⁷... overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

³⁸And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. ³⁹Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:28, 37-39 / NLT).

And let me just add this thought to the mix. The Bible is just as clear about the nature of suffering. God uses suffering to teach us and to make us into the men and women He wants us to be. The next time we catch ourselves complaining about anything, let us turn our thoughts to God.

SITUATIONS IN WHICH WE ARE TEMPTED TO COMPLAIN (VS 1-3)

Verses 1-3 give us an occasion to think about situations in which we are tempted to complain. It boils down to this. **WHEN WE DON'T GET WHAT WE WANT, AND WHEN LIFE GETS A LITTLE DIFFICULT, OUR RESPONSE IS USUALLY ONE OF DISCONTENT AND WE START TO COMPLAIN.**

If we analyze our problem, it usually comes from our wrong expectations for life as described in verse 1. Let's take this verse phrase by phrase. "The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin." God led the Israelites through the desert. I think that most of us feel that we were meant to live life in the oasis. In other words, when Jesus promises us an abundant life, we interpret that as good Americans. We think that means that we should not

experience illness, we shouldn't experience the betrayal of friends and loved ones, that we should never experience financial setbacks, and that our loved ones should not get sick and die. Our vision of what life should look like as obedient Christians is that we should be lying on a beach, relaxing in the sun, without a care in the world.

The truth is that in reality enjoying the abundant life Jesus promised means that we spend a great deal of time in the desert. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert before He started His public ministry. We need to get out of our heads that pain is evil and pleasure is good. Listen to what James says:

"²Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. ³For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow" (James 1:2-3 / NLT).

If our expectation is that suffering is not a normal part of life, and if we think suffering is intrinsically evil, then we will set ourselves up to be disappointed and confused for a large portion of our lives.

Let me further put this passage in context. Verse 1 ends like this, "on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt." They are just 6 weeks removed from when God killed the first-born in every Egyptian household, but not one Hebrew died. They were just 6 weeks removed from crossing the Red Sea on dry ground while watching the entire Egyptian Army drowned before their very eyes in that same passage through the sea. They are just 5 weeks and 4 days away from when just 3 days into their journey they grumbled against Moses and God miraculously gave them fresh water to drink at Mara and God gave them rest in an oasis named Elim.

And here, just 6 weeks into this incredible journey, they start to complain and grumble again. I think it was their intention for God to deliver them from their brutal slavery and place them in the Promised Land with their having to do nothing. But God had a plan for bringing them through the desert:

"¹⁷When Pharaoh finally let the people go, God did not lead them on the road that runs through Philistine territory, even though that was the shortest way from Egypt to the Promised Land. God said, "If the people are faced with a battle, they might change their minds and return to Egypt."¹⁸So God led them along a route through the wilderness toward the Red Sea, and the Israelites left Egypt like a marching army" (Exodus 13:17-18 / NLT).

How do we react when we are stuck in traffic? How do we respond when someone cuts us off in traffic? How do we respond when we go shopping only to find out the store is out of what we came for? If we start to complain and grumble about these little things, then how do we react to greater suffering like loss of health, loss of money, loss of loved ones, and loss of work? How do we react when we feel as if we have been mistreated at work or at school? My hunch is that we don't respond well to suffering because it is our expectation that if we are following God and doing what His will is for us, then we should not suffer at all.

And when suffering comes our wrong expectations turn into wrong attitudes as described in verse 2. Let me point out how stupid we get when we start to complain. Listen to the situation of the Hebrews just 6 weeks before this incident:

⁸Then a new king came to the throne of Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph or what he had done. ⁹He told his people, “These Israelites are becoming a threat to us because there are so many of them. ¹⁰We must find a way to put an end to this. If we don’t and if war breaks out, they will join our enemies and fight against us. Then they will escape from the country.”

¹¹So the Egyptians made the Israelites their slaves and put brutal slave drivers over them, hoping to wear them down under heavy burdens. They forced them to build the cities of Pithom and Rameses as supply centers for the king. ¹²But the more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more quickly the Israelites multiplied! The Egyptians soon became alarmed ¹³and decided to make their slavery more bitter still. ¹⁴They were ruthless with the Israelites, forcing them to make bricks and mortar and to work long hours in the fields.

¹⁵Then Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, gave this order to the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah: ¹⁶“When you help the Hebrew women give birth, kill all the boys as soon as they are born. Allow only the baby girls to live” (Exodus 1:8-16 / NLT).

And here is how God described their plight to Moses:

⁷ ... You can be sure I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries for deliverance from their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. ⁸So I have come to rescue them from the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own good and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey ... ⁹The cries of the people of Israel have reached me, and I have seen how the Egyptians have oppressed them with heavy tasks. ¹⁰Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You will lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:7-10 / NLT).

Just less than 6 months ago, the Hebrews were being tormented as slaves with no future hope of any redemption. They were slaves who were hopeless and helpless to do anything about their lot in life. They cried out to God for deliverance and with a mighty and miraculous hand, God delivered them from the most powerful nation on earth.

And now listen to the foolishness that came from their mouths just 6 weeks later here in verse 2:

“ ... 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.”

How ironic is that? Even if they did starve to death in the wilderness, shouldn’t they have thanked God and Moses that at least they could die free men and women? How could they ever come to think of their slavery in Egypt as the good old days? They talk as if they were sitting around the campfire telling stories and eating meat. How stupid is that? The correct response should be, “I’d rather die a free man in the wilderness, than any other kind of life as a slave in Egypt.”

Let’s bring this to our lives. Listen to where we were headed. Jesus put it like this:

⁴¹I, the Son of Man, will send my angels, and they will remove from my Kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace and burn them. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ... ⁴⁸where the worm never dies and the fire never goes out” (Matthew 13:41-42, Mark 9:48 / NLT).

That was my destiny. That was your destiny. We were enslaved to Satan, sin, and death. We were helpless and hopeless to change our eternal destinies. If we are Christians, then according to the Bible there was nothing we could do. We couldn't be good enough to change our destinies. We couldn't do enough good works to change our destinies. It was only placing our faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf that our eternal destinies were changed. In other words, it was Jesus, Who suffered and died on our behalf, that changed our eternal destinies from hell to heaven, from despair to hope, and from eternal suffering to eternal joy. We did nothing for our salvation. It was Jesus Who did it all. The Apostle Paul summed up like this:

"⁸God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it" (Ephesians 2:8-9 / NLT).

If we were to just stop and ponder that for a while, shouldn't we be so thankful that no matter what we had to suffer in this life could ever cause us to complain about a thing? If we are genuine Christians and we understood what God has already done for us in salvation, shouldn't that be enough to live lives of thankfulness? The Hebrews talked as if their slave days in Egypt were the good old days and started to complain. When we don't get what we think we are entitled to, we start to complain. When we have wrong expectations about life, we start to develop wrong attitudes in response to God. And in verse 3 we start to have a wrong focus on the things of this world.

The Hebrews were focused on bread when they should have been focused on freedom. We focus on worldly things when we have been given heaven. Most of us who are older know how quickly time passes. Luig and I were talking the other night and we realized that we have been together for 40 years. We can't believe it's been that long. The time seems to have just flown by. 100 years is a drop in the bucket compared to eternity. If we are focused on how God is preparing us to live in heaven, then we don't get overly excited about the material things we have and we won't be unhappy about the things we don't have. If we find ourselves today enjoying an abundance of health, money, and status, then let's share them with others around us. If we find ourselves lacking something and suffering, let's ask God how He is shaping us and molding us into the men and women He wants us to be. The trick is to keep our minds focused on heaven and on God. We must learn to change our thinking. The Apostle Paul put it this way:

"²Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is" (Romans 12:2 / NLT).

If we don't, then **WHEN WE DON'T GET WHAT WE WANT, AND WHEN LIFE GETS A LITTLE DIFFICULT, OUR RESPONSE IS USUALLY ONE OF DISCONTENT AND WE START TO COMPLAIN.**

**LACK OF LOVE, LACK OF POWER, OR LACK OF INTELLIGENCE
(VS4-8)**

And when we start to become discontent, grumble, and complain, ultimately we are saying that God lacks love, He lacks power, or He lacks intelligence as is illustrated in verses 4-8. We have to remember this. **FORCING GOD'S HAND IS NEVER A GOOD THING.**

Let me just reassure of us of this. As verses 4-5 demonstrate, God doesn't lack any intelligence. In other words, the Bible is very clear that God is omniscient. He is aware of everything that goes on in the universe. Since He is also omnipresent, in other words ever present in every place at all times, nothing happens without His knowing. Did you ever think of this? When you are stuck in traffic, God knows it. When you are sick and suffering, God knows it. When you are being treated unfairly, God knows it. When people betray you, when loved ones get sick and die, God knows it. Jesus put it like this:

“²⁹Not even a sparrow, worth only half a penny, can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it” (Matthew 10:29 / NLT).

Did you catch that? Without God's permission, even a sparrow cannot fall from the sky and die. So if we believe what Jesus says, then we have to acknowledge that whatever we are experiencing or suffering, it did not catch God by surprise. In other words, we can't assume that because God is busy in the Middle East, He is not aware of my being stuck in traffic.

God was well aware that the Hebrews needed to eat soon. God was well aware that the Hebrews were grumbling at Aaron and Moses. But God took it personal. And He was going to demonstrate His knowledge of their grumbling by feeding them with meat and bread. However, this is not going to be a pleasant family dinner. God was going to feed them anyway, but now they will not be experiencing this as a blessing. This is God feeding ungrateful children. I'm not sure I want to hear God say to me, “Okay John, I gave this to you, but you missed the blessing I had in mind for you. And in fact, I was going to just give this to you, but since you are ungrateful, I will give this to you with conditions.”

Verse 4 ends with God saying, “In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.”

The next time you are tempted to complain, first stop and think that God knows exactly where you are and what you are going through. Then further think about this. He has not lost track of us and we cannot be in this situation unless God allowed it or even planned it. So if we want to think with biblical minds, we need to stop before we complain and acknowledge that God knows exactly where we are and what we are experiencing.

If we acknowledge that God knows our suffering, we may be tempted to then ask, “Well then why doesn't He do something about it?” The first conclusion we come to may be that God lacks power. But as verses 6-7 point out, God lacks no power. Perhaps God was exhausted from delivering the Israelites from Egypt. After all, He had to destroy the entire Egyptian Army. Or perhaps God doesn't know how to cook. At any rate, perhaps God does not have the power to take care of them. Listen to what Moses says to the Israelites:

“In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because He has heard you grumbling against Him.”

They were present the night God killed the firstborn in every Egyptian household. They saw the angel of God stand between them and the Egyptian Army. They also saw The Glory Of God in the pillar of cloud stand between them and the Egyptian Army. They saw God part the Red Sea. They saw God close up the sea and kill the entire Egyptian Army. Whenever God is forced to act, we can be sure He will demonstrate His power. The Hebrews were afraid of God, especially when He manifested Himself in power. God could have fed them at any time, and He proved that by sending quail and bread.

Before we start to complain about something, we need to think that if it were God's will, He could remove the suffering and solve the problem at any time. Let's say we were sick and we prayed to get well, and we did recover. Don't we give thanks to God for healing us? How about if we don't recover? How do we explain that? Shouldn't we again look to God? So God is the One Who can either grant or withhold relief to our problems. When Moses complained to God that he was not eloquent enough to be God's man in Egypt, God told him this:

¹¹“Who makes mouths?” the LORD asked him. “Who makes people so they can speak or not speak, hear or not hear, see or not see? Is it not I, the LORD? ¹²Now go, and do as I have told you. I will help you speak well, and I will tell you what to say” (Exodus 4:11-12 / NLT).

Moses complained one more time and the Hebrew text says that God's nose got hot. In other words, God became furious at Moses. The point God was making was that if He wanted Moses to be His man in Egypt, God would empower Him. When we face setbacks, disappointments, or suffering of any kind, we should think that God has the power to change the situation. And if the situation is not changing, perhaps it is God's will for us to learn something there or because we refuse to align our thinking with God's thinking, we may be suffering as a result of our own stubbornness or pride. God has the knowledge and the power to change our situation.

Satan would like us to believe that if our situation is not changing, then God doesn't love us. But as verse 8 reminds us, God lacks no love for us. In fact John 3:16 says:

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (NLT).

Jesus loved us enough to suffer and die for us in the most horrible way. Moses is in essence saying, when God feeds you tomorrow, you should be ashamed of yourselves for ever doubting His love.

Since Jesus died for us so that we could be free from sin, Satan, and death, why would we doubt His love? Here is the point. Since God loves us and knows where we are and what we are facing, and since He has the power to do anything He chooses, we must in faith trust that God has a specific purpose. If we develop this attitude, then we will be able to rejoice in any and all situations. But it takes a whole transformation in our life orientation. We must shift our attention to living for God. Then we will be able to be content in all situations. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says about being content in any and every situation. We know that Paul suffered a great deal. And we know that God refused to heal him from at least one ailment:

¹¹ ... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any

and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-13 / NIV).

On the other hand, complaining says that we don't trust in God's wisdom, His power, or His love. As we have seen, **FORCING GOD'S HAND IS NEVER A GOOD THING.**

GOD DOES NOT RESPOND WELL TO COMPLAINING (VS 9-14)

Along those same lines we need to remember that God does not respond well to complaining as described in verses 9-14. In other words, **SHOWING A LACK OF RESPECT FOR GOD IS ALSO NEVER A GOOD THING.** I'd like to remind us of this one more time. When we complain about our situation, we are actually showing a lack of respect for God. We are either questioning His wisdom, His power, or His love.

In verse 9 God calls the complainers to attention. In the military, the troops muster up for inspection and assignment. If you were being disciplined for something, you were called on the carpet before the commanding officer. You must knock on the door and when you hear the officer say, "Enter" you enter stand at attention until the commander says, "At ease." Even then, when you are standing at Parade Rest, you are still pretty rigid. This is the God of the universe, calling the nation of Israel to muster up before Him and explain their grumbling and complaining.

What could they possibly say to God? Would they dare accuse Him of being stupid, or impotent, or mean? Sometimes I think we forget Who God is. We treat Him like a doormat and we have lost respect for Him.

If God really doesn't respond well to complaining, then why do we feel so free to do it? If we are going to conform to the image and nature of Jesus, then we need to read the Bible and understand what it is that God expects of us. He expects us to give thanks and praise in all situations.

If we don't verses 10-12 kick it up a notch in showing us God's judgment. Verse 10 should be frightening enough to warn us against complaining. The Lord simply shows up and His glory appears in the pillar of cloud. The Israelites know the power of this cloud. They watched it kill the Egyptians. And then God says to the Israelites through Moses that He has heard their grumbling. And when they eat tomorrow, God wants them to know how omnipotent and how omniscient He actually is. Standing at attention before God, and hearing Him note that I was complaining would definitely cause me to lose my appetite. And then further while I was eating the next morning, I would clearly remember that God said that as I ate, I would know that He was the LORD God.

I don't want to push God over the edge where I force Him to judge me. I'm hoping that I will fall more and more in love with Him every day. And that love would be so intense that it wouldn't matter what circumstance I needed to face, I would be content. I pray that I would be able to say with the songwriter, "It is enough that Jesus died ... and that He died for me."

Even in the end, God's grace wins out in verses 13-14. God feeds the Israelites and cares for them. He fed them with quail and manna. I'm wondering how ashamed they were or if they could even enjoy God's provision? Please let's develop attitudes of thankfulness and contentment because **SHOWING A LACK OF RESPECT FOR GOD IS ALSO NEVER A GOOD THING.**

God really does love us and He wants to prepare us to live in heaven with Him. We may not like the situations we find ourselves in and our first instinct may be to complain. However let's remember what complaining is. **WHEN WE COMPLAIN AND ARE NOT CONTENT WE ARE ACTUALLY ACCUSING GOD OF NOT LOVING US.**

We are transformed by the renewing of our minds. In other words, we need to learn to think from a heavenly perspective. Listen to what Os Guinness says in his book The Call:
"Psychologist Ernest Becker clearly recognized this problem. In his book *The Denial of Death* he acknowledged: 'One can only talk about an ideal human character from a perspective of absolute transcendence.' Becker therefore saw that Soren Kierkegaard's formula for what it means to be a man was apt and inspiring. To be a great human being was to be 'a knight of faith,' which Becker describes sympathetically:

This figure is the man who lives in faith, who has given over the meaning of his life to his Creator, and who lives centered on the energies of his Creator. He accepts whatever happens in this visible dimension without complaint, lives his life as a duty, faces his death without a qualm. No pettiness is so petty that it threatens his meanings; no task is too frightening to be beyond his courage. He is fully in the world on its terms and wholly beyond the world in his trust in the invisible dimension."

I want to encourage us to remember that no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, whether good or bad, that God is working all things together for our good. Our mission is to constantly remind ourselves to love Him, trust Him, and ensure that we are pursuing His will for us to live holy lives. Facing all situations that come into our lives without complaining demonstrates our love for God and our trust in Him.