“Rising Above Complaint”
Exodus 15:22-16:15

A Sermon
Delivered by
Chaplain Carey Cash

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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

One of the people that made a great impact on my life when I was in my early 20s was a man named Craig Harris. Craig was the youth and college pastor at the church I attended when I was a Citadel cadet. And he had the most winsome faith of just about anyone I’ve ever known. Before he was a pastor, he played college football and then went on to be the head varsity football coach at the local high school, and actually started that school’s first chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. You can imagine what an influence he had on the student body. One of the distinct images I have of Craig Harris is that whenever I was a part of a group that was with him on a retreat or doing a work-project with the youth, or on a missions trip, whenever it got hard or it started raining, or we ran out of supplies, you would always hear him say, “You can’t make me complain!” It didn’t matter what we were doing – building homes in run-down neighborhoods, running Vacation Bible Schools in the August heat, painting or landscaping for people who couldn’t do it themselves…whenever the group would start to grumble, we would always hear Craig, ringing out, “You can’t make me complain!” And it was contagious! Soon we were all saying, “That’s right, you can’t make us complain!” His attitude and an outlook changed everyone around him.

Our scripture passage this morning from the book of Exodus is about a people who could really have used a Craig Harris. In Exodus 15:22 we’re told that only three days out from the miracle of the Red Sea crossing (the single greatest miracle of the Old Testament), the people of Israel began to grumble and complain…for the water was bitter, and they could not drink it. Now I suppose not having drinkable water is more than just a mere inconvenience. It can be a dire thing. But the word used for complain and the tenor of this verse suggests a kind of complaining that expects something, demands something, and is offended when that expectation is not met. And so Moses cried to the Lord on their behalf, and God did something remarkable - he provided for their needs. He made the water sweet and good to drink. But he also reminded them to obey him, and to not fall into this trap again. He said that if they would diligently listen to his voice and do right, and give ear to his commandments, then they would be blessed and God would be their healer. Well no more than
three weeks later, and having journeyed farther into the wilderness, we read in Exodus 16 that the whole congregation of Israel, again, complained and grumbled against the Lord. Crying out to Moses and Aaron they said in effect, “In Egypt we had 3 square meals and a place to rest. But you’ve brought us out here in the dessert to die of hunger…we want to go back!”

It’s really quite a claim they’re making. They’re saying that after all they’d been through, all the miracles they’d witnessed, all the intervention by God on their behalf, they’d really rather be back in bondage where at least they could eat. It must have hurt the heart of God. And yet like he did with the water, the Lord answered their need for food. He rained down quail every evening for meat, and in the morning they saw the glory of the Lord as the dew would come up from the ground and leave a fine wafer-like substance called Manna. And this Manna was truly bread from heaven: like coriander seed, it was white and delicate, and the taste was delicious like honey – no doubt a reminder to them of God’s promise to bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey. And the children of Israel ate this Manna every day for 40 years until the day they finally crossed into the promised-land. The obvious question that most people ask when they read this account is how could the Israelites have witnessed so great an act as they did - the parting of the Red Sea - and almost as soon as they got to the other shore, so quickly begin to complain and grumble against God? Just days earlier they were singing songs of deliverance as they walked on virgin soil to freedom; and now, just days later, they were grumbling, murmuring, and talking about going back.

In this week’s e-letter Chaplain Gore brings out the excellent point that at one level, the grumbling of the Israelites comes from an undisciplined use of the memory. Think about it when we’re faced with momentary discomfort, often the only thing we can think about is the inconvenience and pain of the moment. Like an infant who’s dropped off in the nursery or daycare who cries uncontrollably because to him or her, Mom is never coming back…but we too, when we find ourselves in difficult or confusing circumstances, we think only in the present. We don’t pause and remember who God is, what he’s done in our lives, the blessings he has poured out upon us, that the lines have fallen to us in pleasant places and we have so much for which to be thankful. And I’m the guiltiest offender. An undisciplined use of memory colors the way we even view the past. And it makes permanent – at least in our mind - the momentary light affliction, that we may be going through now.

But there may be more to this still. Notice the claim of the Israelites in Exodus 16:3, that “at least in Egypt, for all the slavery and subjugation, they had food to eat.” The irony here is that according to the biblical narrative, if we go back to Exodus 12:38, we’re actually told that the people left Egypt with a great many cattle,
both flocks, and herds.” Some scholars ask why did they not just eat from their flocks? We speculate here, but one distinct possibility is that the Israelites did in fact have flocks and herds from which they could’ve eaten at any time, however it is possible that they saw these animals as gods. Recall that it would not be long before they would fashion a golden calf out of their treasure and worship it as a god at Mt. Sinai.

Whatever the reasons for their hunger and their complaining, it’s clear that while God had gotten them out of Egypt, he had not yet gotten Egypt out of them.

In fact, their complaining and murmuring sadly became one of their distinguishing characteristics for the better part of 40 years. When we look at the whole story of the children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness, the persistent feature, the repeated pattern was this spirit of murmuring against God and the circumstances in which they find themselves. In Exodus 15, they complain about the water. In Exodus 16, they grumble that there’s not enough food. In Exodus 17, again it’s an issue of water. In Numbers 14, they grumble because of their enemies and the challenges facing them; later in that chapter, they complain about their leaders, in fact they want to stone their leaders. In Numbers 16, they don’t feel like they’re getting enough respect and that they deserve better. And in Numbers 17, they’re bitter that life just hasn’t turned out the way they thought it would. And so God allowed them to wander around the dessert for 40 years allowing an entire generation to die off before they inherited the blessing of the land he promised them. A journey that should have taken no more than a few months at best, took a generation, because that’s what complaining does.

It grinds our spiritual lives to a halt, arresting our development as believers. And if we remain this way, God will let us wander in our lives for however long it takes, and we will miss out on the great work of sanctification he wants to do us in us. To be fair, I really don’t think people wake up and say to themselves, I think I’m going to begin complaining or stop growing in my faith. It’s more subtle than that. Complaining or grumbling is one of those snares that’s easy to fall into. In Hebrews 12:1-2, we’re encouraged “to lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us.” Complaining is just like that – it’s easy to fall into; easy to get tangled up in. Part of the reason is that, at least initially, our complaints may come from genuine hurt that we’ve experienced in our lives, or disillusionment with someone - some expectation or hope that wasn’t met. It can come from being the object of injustice or unfair treatment that leaves us upset. We can begin to murmur when we find ourselves in the midst of a painful season in life. Like Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh, it may seem like wherever we go, that rain cloud is over us.

And it should be pointed out that there are times when it is good and right to offer a complaint. We actually teach in marriage prep that it can be a healthy thing to offer a specific complaint to your spouse rather
than a criticism or attack. For example, when a husband leaves his big size 14 shoes lying in the living room, his wife could say, “You lazy slob, pick up your big shoes!” That’s sort of a personal attack. Or she could say, “When you leave your shoes lying on the floor, it makes me feel like you don’t appreciate the work I do in the home.” Much better - a specific complaint. And then there are times when it is the right thing to do to file a complaint. When there’s injustice and the end goal is to bring about a correct action or good outcome or reconciliation. But what about when complaining or grumbling becomes the backdrop of our lives…when we find ourselves going for long periods of time, murmuring against God or other people, or the circumstances in which we find ourselves? Just two week ago two of my little girls, Beatrice (6 year old) and Giorgia Mae (4), went to their very first organized soccer practice. So it was the first time in their young lives, they faced competition. Within the first you could tell they were shocked and even offended that someone would actually dare to steal the ball from them, and that other players could be so aggressive. It was not at all what they expected. They were thinking, “I’m going to get out there like I do when it’s just me and my daddy and I’ll just kick the ball and it will go in the net.” But instead “all of these other kids are coming at me, and can you believe they’re trying to take the ball from me…!”

Now this is just a momentary experience in a soccer game, but if we’re not careful, we can go for whole seasons of our lives like this – undone that things aren’t working out just like we want them to. And this frustration can begin to color everything. Proverbs 4:24 tells us to “Watch over our heart with all diligence, for from it flows the springs of life.” If we’re not watchful and prayerful, frustration can turn into complaint and our hearts can become hoe to bitterness and resentment, and we begin to fall short of God’s best for us, missing the blessing of his unfolding purposes in our lives. This is why the writer to the Hebrews warns us, “See to it that none of us comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, for by it many are defiled.” (Hebrews 12:15) So how then can we rise above complaint? How do we bring our hearts out of the grumbling wilderness and into the light of God’s glory where we experience his best for us? How do we do this?

We must die. An entire generation had to die out before the children of Israel were ready to enter the promised-land. And the same is true in our lives. If we are going to come out of the wilderness and reflect the glory of God in our lives, then we too must learn to die to self. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” Hebrews 13 says that “as Jesus suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured, offering up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” Rising above complaint requires a death, for when we choose to rejoice in the midst of difficulty, when
we choose to give thanks in midst of hardship, when we choose to love and forgive in the midst of offense, when we offer a sacrifice of praise against everything we know, we are literally dying a death. We’re killing our right to hold on to anger. We’re cutting off the root of bitterness that’s become such a part of us. And we bleed; we grieve our sins; we mourn our loss. And yet when we do this, we find something is happening – we’re being made more like Jesus who “learned obedience by the things which he suffered.” (Hebrews 5:8)

Many of you have read the story The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams. It’s a story about a stuffed animal – in this case a rabbit - who finds himself in a nursery one day talking to another stuffed animal - the Skin horse. The Skin Horse had lived much longer in the nursery than any of the other animals. So he was old. His brown coat was bald and showed the seams underneath. Most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string. But he was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and brag about what they could do. And yet one by one their mainsprings had broken, and the skin horse knew that they were only toys, and would probably never turn into anything else. "What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?" "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real." "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly." "I suppose you are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he hadn’t said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled. "The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

When the Lord allows difficult or painful seasons in our lives - suffering - it’s because he’s making you real. Jesus says, “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, but every branch that bears fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” Pruning hurts. It actually means to cauterize something. But this is what the Lord does…this is how he grows us in his likeness. And when we’re invited into this process (this fellowship of suffering), if we can learn to accept it with joy and a winsome trust, if we will offer a sacrifice of praise to God right in the middle of it…we will find that the greatest work of all is happening - we are becoming like Jesus. It’s true, our hairs might get rubbed off, our eyes may drop out, our seams may unravel, and we
might get loose in the joints and shabby. But “we are beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, for we are being transformed into that same image, the image of the Son - from glory to glory.” Amen.