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Rick Myatt

LIKE THE EFFECT OF YAWNING
Exodus 17:1-7

A new day has dawned. It is a new era. I know this is true because my cable television company told me so. Time Warner has provided our TV and Internet for years. A few months ago we began seeing commercials informing us that a new day was coming. A wondrous new age was about to dawn, clearly the utopian dream would be achieved at last. What would usher in this new age? Time Warner would become part of a new company called Spectrum. That recently happened, and the new day has indeed dawned.

Laurie and I have experienced this bold new day. It has been a new age in which our fees have increased considerably and we have had constant problems with our service. So yes, it has been a new day, I just didn't realize that they meant this new era would be a new day of higher prices for significantly worse service. Some aspects of our TV service that have functioned without a glitch for years have become nearly unusable. I have repeatedly called this wondrous new company to report problems and ask for assistance. Nothing has helped. Finally I got fed up. I called once more and after much travail got to talk to a human being. After once again hearing from him that their engineers were doing all they could to fix the problem but that it is a very difficult problem (one that never seemed to bother the previous company), I told him, "I am just calling to register a complaint. I am fed up with the awful service we have had since your new company took over and I want to make clear if you do not fix this quickly we are going to find other options. You are going to lose us as customers."

Curiously, shortly after that call the problem was miraculously resolved. Obviously complaining did the trick. I've always heard that the squeaky wheel gets the grease, and now it appears this is true. Perhaps my complaining finally motivated a disinterested and unhelpful business to do something because if they didn't it might hurt their bottom line. However, I can assure you that in general complaining is not the best strategy for life. In fact, it is just the opposite. Unfortunately the wilderness provides fertile soil for grumbling. When we are stuck in some difficult desert portion of life it is awfully tempting to respond by complaining. We will see this as we look at the experience of another group of people who found themselves out in the wilderness. The story is in Exodus 17:1-7.

ISRAEL COMPLAINED ABOUT WATER

Israel had finally been released from slavery in Egypt after years of oppression. God brought about their release through an escalating series of miracles that made life more and more miserable for their Egyptians masters, culminating in the heartbreaking deaths of their firstborn children. After they were freed the Israelis were rescued by God when he parted the waters of the Red Sea, saving them from the oncoming Egyptian army.

Israel proceeded into the desert of the Sinai Peninsula. They quickly ran out of water, which God miraculously provided, then they ran out of food and once again God provided in an astounding way. Now they come to a place called Rephidim and they run out of water once again. Just to review, God worked a long series of miracles to get them free from slavery in Egypt. Then he worked one of the most colossal miracles of all time in parting the sea, truly a classic, to rescue them. Then he miraculously provided them with water. He followed that up by giving them food where no food existed.

For those of you keeping score at home, that's 10 miracles in Egypt, 1 at the Red Sea, 1 to provide water and another to provide food. All of these were pretty much jaw-dropping whopper style miracles. That's 13 of them in a relatively short space of time. So what would you expect to happen when they ran out of water again? I'd expect them to say, "This isn't our first rodeo. We know how this works. This is just another chance for God to do his thing. I can't wait to see how he pulls this one off. And I know he will."

That's what I would expect. That's what I would hope for. That's not what happened. Verse 2 says they "quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink.'" Israel faced a tough situation, to be sure. They'd die without water, so of course they would ask Moses to lead them to some. I would expect something along the lines of, "Hey, Moses, how about if you and the Lord sort of do your thing and make some good old H2O pop up out of the desert?"

That's not how it went. Instead the people of Israel "quarreled" with Moses. The Hebrew word used there literally meant to physically fight with someone. I don't think they got into a brawl with Moses, but this does suggest that when they brought the issue to his attention they were none to pleasant about it. The author used the word "quarrel" here because that expressed the spirit of the way the people approached Moses. It was with complaint, accusation and slander.

We get a glimpse of that in verse 3 where it says they “grumbled” against Moses. They were accusing him and maligning him, complaining to one another about him and tearing his leadership down to each other. The verse reports they were saying, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” Oh, right. That was the plan. Moses actually hated his people and this whole thing was nothing but a diabolical plot to kill them off in the desert.

Notice how severe their attitude was in verse 4. Moses cried out to God, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.” Yep, they were quarreling with him all right. Some were proposing assassinating him. Fortunately God did do his thing again. He had Moses whack a rock with his stick, and water came gushing out.

Once again God came through. But the salient point here is that even though they had been given lots of reasons to believe God would take care of them, the people chose grumbling and complaining instead of trusting him.

ISRAEL HAD A HABIT OF COMPLAINING

This is not the first time this trait showed up. Look at Exodus 14:11-12. This was when Israel was trapped on the Red Sea beach with the Egyptian army closing fast on them. Verse 10 says the Israelis were terrified. “They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?’” Oh, right, Moses was so cruel he made sure they came out in the desert to get slaughtered by the Egyptians. He was obviously a devious, evil agent of Egypt.

When they ran out of water more complaining ensued. Exodus 15:23-24 says, “When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. That is why the place is called Marah. So the people grumbled against Moses saying, ‘What are we to drink?’” After that food ran short. In Exodus 16:2-3 you see how that went. “In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘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.’” Let me get this straight. You would have preferred to die in Egypt rather than take your chances in the desert?

God provided them manna, a food that did not previously exist. It just showed up lying on the ground from out of nowhere. All they had to do was pick it up. But in chapter 17 when the water runs short again they go back to their mantra. They complain and accuse Moses of trying to kill them all.

In one way I understand the dissatisfaction of the people. Part of it is the “good old days” effect. You know how it is easy to look back on the “good old days” and sort of filter them with a rosy glow. You remember them as better than they were and sort of forget the blemishes that weren’t so pretty. This week is the NFL draft. Man that hurts. I remember the good old days when San Diego had an NFL team. I recall being engrossed in who the Chargers should draft. I begin to remember the joy of watching the Chargers and wearing my Charger shirt and hat. Oh, but wait. Let’s remember those days a bit more clearly. Do you also remember gnashing your teeth at yet another stupid defeat snatched from the jaws of victory at the last second? Do you recall the bonehead draft picks and the awful personnel decisions made by a dysfunctional and cheap, money grubbing organization? Oh yeah, I forgot about all that. I forget how often after yet another ugly defeat Laurie would ask, “Why do you keep watching this? Why do you do it to yourself?” I could only answer, “Because it feels so good when I stop.” When I remember those days as they really were I say good riddance, Lucifer Spanos, a man I heard described by a writer for a national publication, a man not from San Diego, as an abysmally bad owner, the worst in the NFL.

Yes, they were slaves in Egypt, but in the rose colored glow of hindsight they thought, life there wasn’t so bad. They may have had to work hard but they had all the food and water they needed. They had all kinds of tasty dishes to eat. Now all they have is manna every day. Do you know what the Hebrew word manna meant? It meant “what is it?” When I have to ask of food set before me “what is it?” because it is unrecognizable, it’s a good bet that this is not going to be a Happy Meal. To make it even worse, they had “what is it?” every day. Hey, what’s for breakfast today? Fried “what is it.” Again? Bummer. How about tomorrow? Baked “what is it.” How about the next day? What is it Benedict.

To compound the problem, they were living in a wilderness. This was not a Caribbean cruise. They were living in a hot, dry, barren, harsh and rugged desert. Mostly no one bothered them there because no one lived there or wanted to go there. And they were camping in that harsh desert! At least in Egypt they had houses to live in with beds to sleep on. I know some of you like camping a lot, but I submit that you only like it because at some point you can go home. What if you didn’t have a home and you had to live permanently out in the woods? Then you’d admit the truth about camping. It’s just hard, inconvenient and uncomfortable. I agree with comedian Jim Gaffigan who says the only happy camper is the guy that’s leaving the campground to go home. The Israelis were not going home for a long time.

So yes, I get that conditions were far from a Hawaiian vacation. There were things to complain about if you wanted to grumble. But God was in the process of doing a stupendous thing for them. They were free! They were on their way to their own homeland. God had worked and would continue to work a string of astounding miracles to take care of them. He was using Moses to make it all happen. It seems like a little gratitude was in order. Instead, they issued a constant stream of grumbling and complaint. There would be still more complaining later.

Do you want to know what God thought of their grumbling and complaining? Look at 1 Corinthians 10:10-11. Speaking of that group of people Paul wrote, “Do not grumble, as some of them did, and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.” That’s a big “Don’t do that!”

Look at Philippians 2:15. Paul wanted the Philippians and us to “become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky.” Paul says followers of Jesus are to be noticeably different from the people in the world around us, as obvious and as delightful as stars in the night sky. Some Christians talk about how awful our society is and how God has called us to bring about change in the society. That’s not what that verse tells me. Paul doesn’t say that we need to straighten out this warped and crooked world. He didn’t tell us to make the night sky turn into daylight. He said our job is to shine like stars in it.

I’ve always wanted to be a star, but I never have been. Now I have the chance to be a star. But how does Paul say I am to do that? I am to do it by being blameless, pure, without fault. Well that eliminates me as a star. Without fault means flawless, perfect. Try as much as I might that’s never going to happen. Paul might as well have said to me, “Rick, be a star athlete, one of professional level abilities.” I’d love to do that, but I can’t. It’s beyond my capabilities no matter how hard I try. Why would Paul even say such a thing since it is impossible for us?

Notice the words verse 15 begins with. It starts with “so that.” Those are crucial words. There is something we must do that will cause us to be without fault in the way Paul has in mind. He knows we won’t be truly perfect, but he wants us to be without fault in a particular way. The “so that” clause points us to the previous verse, which says, “Do everything without grumbling or arguing.” The way we become stars who are without fault is by never complaining or grumbling. Not even a little. Paul says do everything without grumbling. Not some things, not most things, not the important things, but everything. Christians are used to the

idea that they are to be different from the world, but that is so often turned into trivial things that make no difference. Here is a way God says we are to be different. It is that we simply never grumble or complain about anything.

That's truly different because pretty much everywhere you go people are grumbling and complaining about just about everything. Complaining is the way of the human race. This is because we are all addicted to self. Though we would never say it this way, we all want life to serve us perfectly. We want people to treat us exactly the way we desire. And that doesn't happen. We don't feel life ever quite gives us what we long for and think we deserve and people don't treat us with the love, admiration and service we wish for. So we go through our days experiencing a steady drumbeat of disappointment and unmet expectations. There is, in our minds, lots of reason to complain.

Last summer Laurie and I visited Michael and Carissa in Mississippi for the last time. Our flight home, as is our habit, turned into something of an adventure. Our flight was so late we missed our connection and had to spend the night in Dallas. It was beyond frustrating. Oh, and by the way, we also had to ride the entire way in ridiculously uncomfortable seats. I did a little research on those seats. Do you know who designed them? They were created by the CIA as an enhanced interrogation technique. My point is I, along with everyone else in the country, grumble about the airlines. I was not shy about venting my unhappiness at the way we were shuffled around by the airlines. I am going to have to repent of that since Michael is working for an airline. Fortunately it's Delta, not United. Here's one thing that might help me. Michael and Carissa just moved here. To do so they had to drive here from Mississippi. That entailed long days of driving across miles and miles and miles of nothing but boring desert. 150 years ago that trip would have meant months of walking across that forbidding desert. And I complained because instead of it being a 5 hour trip we had to stay overnight one night. Perhaps it was a little inconvenient, but shouldn't I be rejoicing about the fact that I didn't have to walk or drive, and that the airline got us home safely?

Years ago on a number of flights we had we were served meals called chicken with rice, Caribbean chicken and Hawaiian chicken. They had different names but they were all the same dish. Like everyone we complained because airline food wasn't very good. Do you know what I would do today if I had a flight and they served me the same Caribbean chicken or chicken and rice? I would be thrilled and praise that airline as maybe the best airline on the planet. Yet if they made a habit of once again serving meals on flights, it wouldn't be long before I'd be complaining about the low quality of the food. Complaining is just what we do. It is how we roll.

IMPLICATIONS

WHY DOES GOD THINK COMPLAINING IS SO BAD?

Sometimes our grumbling is about people, the way the Israelis grumbled about Moses. Leaders, like Moses, are prime targets for complaining, but we also complain about neighbors, co-workers, teammates, spouses, children, parents, friends, acquaintances, just about anyone. In any group of humans, especially in places of employment or churches, there is bound to be gossip. Do I need to point out that gossip rarely, if ever, takes the form of, "Let me tell you how wonderful this person is. You should hear about the amazing beautiful thing he or she did."

God hates grumbling about other people because it asserts our superiority. It is as though we are the judges to whom others must answer. for two reasons. One is that it is all about us asserting our superiority to another person. The Bible says repeatedly that God is opposed to the proud. Pride is the root of all our problems with God.

The second problem with our grumbling against other people is that it divides. Once we have planted those negative words and thoughts in other people's ears they cannot unhear them. It colors their view of the person we are grumbling against and tends to distance them from that individual. Often our grumbling creates factions.

The other form our grumbling takes has to do with our circumstances. We complain about all the hardships and disappointments and unfair things in our lives. We have to eat manna again? If I have to eat manna cakes one more time I'm going to scream. Unfortunately when you look for reasons to complain you won't have difficulty finding them. I could complain because I recently got an infection in my eye, I woke up one morning with a pulled muscle in my leg, meaning I got injured sleeping, my back hurt, my left knee hurt for some unknown reason, and I got 3 canker sores.

I recently helped my mother fill out her tax forms. Her tax situation is about as easy as it gets. But this year the government threw in a few wrinkles that made it more difficult to decipher what they wanted. I started grumbling about those people in Washington. Are they actual human beings? They can't be. No human person would want to create such cumbersome and twisted systems and inflict such inconvenience on other people. If you are from Hollywood you would suspect they are actually aliens, silently invading our planet with plans to destroy us with bureaucratic tedium and frustration. As a religious person I don't think they're extra-terrestrials. I believe we are dealing with demonic forces here. Do you get

what I'm doing here? I'm complaining. Oh it is so very easy to fall into that trap because there is so very much in life that is worthy of complaining about. Have you noticed that these days it seems like incompetence is everywhere? When I deal with large companies I now just expect they won't do what they say they will do and what one should reasonably expect them to do. And let's not even talk about body falling apart, our massive bureaucratic government that has become grotesque.

Unfortunately, life is hard. Most of us find it doesn't go the way we want a good part of the time. As the hurts, disappointments and losses pile up it is natural to respond by venting our unhappiness over it all. Still, in a world full of hunger, human trafficking, war, poverty and all manner of serious ills, why make a thing about complaining? It goes back to a simple truth you hear about a lot from me. What God supplies is enough. Believing that truth and trusting him is at the very core of walking with him. The moment we complain we are saying unequivocally that what God supplies is not enough. What God is giving me today, what he is providing for me in this situation is not good and it is certainly not enough for me. This says God is not worthy of my trust. This could be for one of two reasons.

We could be thinking that God may care about us but he is obviously unable to do anything about our situation. We are saying God is good and loving but he's weak. The other possibility is we could be saying that God is not weak, he's powerful enough, but he doesn't care enough about us to help. He brought us out into this wilderness to die. Last year I had a problem with my cell phone. It finally became almost totally non-functional. I went back to the store of our mobile service provider where I bought the phone and explained the problem. I asked how to fix it. The representative began telling me about a different plan I could buy and different phones I could purchase that would commit me to another 2 year contract. I said I didn't want to buy anything, I just wanted to solve the problem with my current phone. He then launched into a presentation of other options he could sell me. He said these other options were my only possible solutions. There was no fix for my phone. I told him I'd have to think it over. He claimed there was nothing I could do about my phone. It was just my tough luck and I needed to buy something new. I didn't want to spend the money to buy something new, but I finally decided I'd just have to bite the bullet. A couple of days later I reluctantly, with resignation, went to a different store that was run by the same mobile phone company. I explained the problem again to a representative there, expecting him to lay out again the options for what I would have to buy. He examined my phone for several minutes then said, "We're going to replace your phone." He said the malfunction was unfortunately a characteristic failure of that particular phone and in minutes

took care of the problem by getting me a replacement phone at no cost to me. So here's what I learned. The first guy had the ability to fix my problem. He just didn't want to. He was only interested in selling me something. When we complain while believing that God has the power to solve our problem, we are saying that he does not care about us. He's not interested in helping us with our problems. In other words, he doesn't really love us.

When we complain we deeply dishonor God. **You cannot worship and grumble at the same time.** You must choose. **When you are complaining you are not worshipping God.** In fact, your complaining is an act of selfishness, rebellion and pride. When you grumble and complain you are saying loudly what God has supplied you is not enough. In other words, God is not to be trusted.

The fundamental question in life is can I trust God? Satan is continually telling us that we cannot. That was his message in the Garden of Eden. And when we complain we are agreeing with him. That is why God makes such an issue of complaining. The effect of it on us and those who hear it is too terrible to behold.

WHAT CAN HELP US STOP COMPLAINING?

Learn the fine art of contentment

In Philippians 4:11 Paul wrote, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." Then in verse 12 he said, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation." When Paul wrote those words his circumstances were terrible. He was in chains, and he had been in prison for years even though he had never done a single thing wrong. The whole thing was completely unjust. He had lots of reasons to complain bitterly about the way he was being treated and about the raw deal life had been given him. But instead he said he was content!

If you are complaining, you are not content. If you are content, you are not complaining. You are saying quite the opposite. You are saying, "I'm good with things as they are today." Yes, but what if I'm not? What if I don't like what's happening and want no part of it? How am I supposed to be content with that?

I'm pretty sure that Paul didn't dream of being an unjustly held political prisoner. He wasn't saying, "I love being chained up. You should try it, because it's great." He had learned a secret that enabled him to be content. Great, I need to know that secret. What is it?

Actually, it's not a secret. The secret ingredient of this recipe is, what God supplies is enough. I have today what God wants me to have this day, and he knows that it is sufficient for me to be content and joyful. Applying this truth requires two things of us:

Faith to believe that God really is powerful enough and loving enough to give us what we need at all times.

Submission. We have to accept what God gives us on those occasions when it feels like what he has given us is the last thing we want. In fact, it means accepting it from God when it is the first thing on the list of what we don't want.

What will enable us to do this is letting the Spirit of Christ rule in our hearts. Do you think Jesus had anything to complain about? Are you kidding? How did what he experienced in this world compare with the glory of heaven? He should have gone around continually saying, "The scenery here is dull and ugly. The weather is terrible. The food is just awful. And the people, don't get me started about the people." Do you ever see Jesus whining, complaining or grumbling? I don't. So if we let the Spirit of Jesus rule in us, will we complain? Clearly not.

Seek to bless people at all times

There are some things about complaining that we need to remember. The first is that it is wildly contagious. It's like yawning. You know how if you are around someone who yawns, the next thing you know you are yawning too. It even makes you sort of feel tired.

When you are around someone who is complaining it has a similar effect. The next thing you know you are complaining too. Since it dishonors God, when you complain you are helping other people buy Satan's lie and you are encouraging them to heap dishonor on our glorious God.

There is something else negative about complaining. It doesn't help. It doesn't fix whatever you feel the problem is, and it doesn't make you feel any better. In fact, it just stokes the fire. It builds a case for you to feel mistreated and can make you feel even more disappointed and depressed. It most certainly does not cheer you up. You do not say, "Ah, great, now that I've gotten all those complaints off my chest I feel so much better."

Another problem with complaining is that it is discouraging and demotivating to others. Have you been around a person that complains a lot? Do you come away from interaction with that person feeling more energized, more hopeful, more

joyful? Do you find yourself loving God more and desiring to praise him more than ever? No, complaining just sucks the joy and energy out of a room.

In Ephesians 4:29 Paul wrote, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” In other words, make it your goal to bless people, to lift their spirits, to direct them to greater faith and to give them hope. Complaining will never do any of that.

Best selling author Max Lucado tells about his experience running a marathon. At one point he found himself running next to a man who was complaining. He was saying, “Why did I decide to try to do this? My legs are killing me. I’m already exhausted. It’s so hot out here. There are so many runners in the way. I’m never going to make it.” Lucado realized if he stayed with that guy he would never make it to the end. He was going to quit. He ran ahead and caught up to a 66 year old grandmother. She was upbeat, positive and encouraging. She kept saying, “We’re going to make this. We just have to keep going, don’t worry about how far we have to go. We can do this. We just have to stay hydrated.” He said he began feeling like though it was hard he knew he was going to make it. Finally he couldn’t keep up with granny, and told her he was going to have to drop back. She gave him a parting, “You can do this. Just keep going,” and ran ahead. Which one of those people do you think God wants us to be more like?

Seek God's glory with all your heart

The best method for avoiding complaining is to major in worshiping God and giving thanks. It is simply impossible to complain about something while giving thanks for it. This goes right back to the idea that you can either worship God or you can complain. You cannot do both. Which will you choose?

Unfortunately the natural bent of human nature, which unless you are an alien from another planet, you have at the core of who you are, is to want the entire universe to revolve around self. We want life to serve us, and we feel unfairly treated and offended when it doesn't. Because it pretty consistently does not serve any of us we end up with lots of reason for complaint. We have to decide. What is most important to me, to have the universe serve me, or to have me serve and honor God?

I was watching television recently and saw a commercial for a mortgage company that says in the ad if you have been turned down for a mortgage talk to us and we will get you a mortgage before you can blink an eye. In their efforts to buy a house

here Michael and Carissa were turned down for a mortgage. They have terrific credit readings, they had a huge sum for a down payment, Carissa has a good paying job and Michael had been offered a great paying job by Delta airline. But they were denied due to some convoluted bureaucratic nonsense that has been foisted on us by the aliens in Washington. Some friends who were in a similar situation suggested the company that advertises on TV. They contacted the company, which assured them they could solve the problem. Several days later they turned them down. Every time I see that ad I feel like yelling, "Liars!" I get irked by it. I want to complain about that company.

Who will that benefit? How will God be honored by my whining? What do I really want, to vent my own personal aggravation, or to glorify God and bless other people? Um, I want to vent. No, I really don't. Down deep I want to honor God. So I will give thanks to God. The deadline day for their escrow Carissa called us in the morning to tell us the house deal was going to fall through. They were so disappointed. We were too, but we prayed. Lord, we trust that you are providing Michael and Carissa with what they need, so though we are disappointed, we thank you. An hour later Carissa called back. The sellers of the house were buying another home in another city and their mortgage broker had helped her son get through the exact situation Michael and Carissa were in. What a coincidence. She assured them she could find a way to make it work. And she did. God answered our prayers. What we should do is be thankful, honor him, not complain. Even had the deal fallen through we should have trusted and given thanks to God, knowing that he is at work in our lives. When we worship God instead of complaining we open a door to joy in our own souls, we encourage others and we honor him.