

When Complaining Helps: Words from the Cross

Psalm 22

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Working as a member of the Homeowners Association Board in our neighborhood for the past year, I have confirmed that by nature we are a bunch of complainers.

I realized when I became a part of the board that listening to complaints was the most important part of the job. People who complain want to be heard. They want to know that you care about their issue. Of course, they also want you to fix their problem, but just as important, they want to be treated with respect and with a bit of empathy.

It's a wonderful day when the HOA board can make everyone happy, but we are bound by the covenants of our association just like everyone else. For that reason, many times we cannot do what people ask us to do. However, we can listen and we can always care about what others care about.

When you stop to think about it, most of us are complainers. In fact, some of us would have a black belt in complaining if there were such levels awarded.

For that reason, you would think more people would claim Lamentations as their favorite book in the Bible. You do know there is a book in the Bible just for complainers, don't you?

Wouldn't it be honest and a bit funny if we had a reading from Lamentations and we prefaced it by saying, "Today, reading from Lamentations is Mr. Belittlecutty, who has the gift of complaining. We've asked him to read from the book of complaints today with the complaining spirit that seems to come so natural to him."

Of course, before reading he'd complain. "The pastor's sermon is based on Lamentations today and I'm praying I can stay awake through the first five minutes of it this week."

While people can be cutting with their complaints and even cruel in how they complain, have you noticed that God has at least given us space to complain, even about Him?

Not only is there an entire book about Israel's complaints, but one-third of our Psalms are Psalms of complaint.

But notice something.

We complained about Obama. Now we are complaining about Trump.

We complain about the high cost of health care. We complain when we get of church past 12:00. Sometimes we complain about going to church.

We complain when we are hungry, when we are uncomfortable, inconvenienced, and under-appreciated.

But our Jewish forefathers were a bit bolder. They were not bashful about complaining to God. Look at Psalm 22. The Psalmist asks God why he had been forsaken.

This is a person that has known God to be a protector, an advocate, and a shield. He remembers the trusting relationship his people have had with God in the past, but now, for whatever reason, God seems to have withdrawn from him and he feels the enemy closing in.

He describes how close death feels to him in vivid terms. It feels like strong bulls of Bashan are surrounding him with their mouths open wide. It feels like a ravenous, roaring lion. His body is poured out like water and his heart feels melted like wax.

Evildoers surround him like a pack of dogs.

He can count his bones and his enemies gloat over him; they divide up his clothes among themselves, casting lots to see who gets what piece.

There seems to be little hope for this man.

But he has hope. How do we know? Because he is complaining.

That might sound odd to you, but think of it like this: There was no complaining in the concentration camps because there was no hope.

We complain to God because we have hope of things getting better. I think that is good theology. We can complain to God because we believe God can make things better. Be careful about making this jump to other relationships. Some of you have already thought. "Wow! That must mean there's a lot of hope for my marriage or my job. It might mean there is room for hope but a complaining spirit is often equated with blaming. Other people don't handle complaining very well, so unless we have good communication skills and conflict resolution skills in place, our complaining might erode rather than help the relationship. So learn to complain in healthy ways.

Others are not always good at filtering out our complaints without feeling attacked.

However, God can hear our hearts even if our mouths don't do a great job of getting it right.

God knows if we are complaining to Him, we still have hope in Him and that's a good thing.

If we are complaining to God, we are engaged. It would be worse if we were not engaged with God at all. Apathy will lead to spiritual death.

While it may seem to us that our hope is lost at the moment, our lament is voiced to God, this is a moment of opportunity for the Holy Spirit to reach out and engage us in a process of healing.

It was this very Psalm, the twenty-second, that was on the lips of Jesus when he died on the cross. He quoted words from this Psalm as he hung dying there. This Psalm, words of lament came to his mind, words of complaint, because it felt to him in that dark hour as if God had turned away from him.

Dr. Jon Appleton, beloved pastor of First Baptist Church Athens who died last year, wrote these words when he was the interim pastor of this church:

“Eli! Eli! Sabachthani?”
that shout, “My God! My God! Why have you
forsaken (abandoned) me?”
conveys his most human cry.”

T.S. Eliot, in speaking of human hope, draws an interesting counter,

Asserting that when total abandonment occurs, one
Feels so alone,
So lost, nothing can equate with any degree of hope.
To live hopelessly is one's sense of the last straw.
Faith's road is tough, and the Bible makes no bones
About it.
The fourth Word places him squarely, eye to eye,
With us.
He did not “bottle up” his despair;
Nor whistle in the dark;
Nor hide his humiliation;
But shouted the loudest, most universal, human cry,
“My God! My God! Why Me?
Thank God for Jesus' shout of doubt!
It takes courage, when hope adjourns, to
Disbelieve.
Had he been so insulated to withstand the shame
And the pain, he would not have been real to us,
Nor for us.
He would have been no more than a puppet,
Marionetted by the fingers of God.
Jesus suffered. He really did.
Jesus felt pain. He really did.
His despair wrung him. It really did.
Jesus, dying. He really would.
Jesus was not a controlled puppet to mock our
Mortality.
Dying, he was human, but in a most divine,
Mysterious way.
How wondrous Jesus was. (Words from the Cross, April 2009)

However, as we think of the words of Jesus from the cross, they were more than just these words.

Yes, he felt abandoned. But he also assured the thief they would be together in paradise. He'd told the disciples of the resurrection.

So I have a question for you. When Jesus quoted Psalm 22 from the cross, do you think Jesus knew that one verse, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" or do you think Jesus was familiar with the entire Psalm?

It matters.

There is no doubt that Jesus was familiar with the entire Psalm.

He would have been familiar with verse 18 where the Psalmist talked about people dividing his clothes among themselves after casting lots for them, just as they did for Jesus' clothing at the foot of the cross.

More than this, Jesus would have been familiar with the tone of the Psalmist and how this Psalmist moved from total despair to hope.

Even though there is nothing in the Psalm itself to indicate that the suffering of the Psalmist had been lifted, the gaze Psalmist had into the future changed and his hope for the future.

After asking for deliverance and asking to be rescued from the mouth of the lion and from the horns of the wild oxen, he said he would declare God's name to his brothers in the congregation. He called on the descendants of Jacob to honor him and the descendants of Israel to revere him. Why? The Psalmist believed that God had heard him. The Psalmist believed that God had listened to his cry for help. There was no guarantee of any change. But he believed God had listened, and for him that was enough.

Then the Psalmist seems caught up in something beyond himself. Typically, when we complain, it's all about us and our needs. We don't often complain on behalf of others because we are selfish. It's all about us.

But the Psalmist concluded by thinking about others, the poor and people throughout the earth, people of all nations. His vision was that people of all nations would bow down to the Lord. Even those who had already died, the Psalmist said would kneel before the Lord, even those people not yet born.

Jesus understood that the cross was not his final destination. He had told his disciples on more than one occasion that it had to occur and that they should expect him to be raised from the dead, but none of them expected it.

While Jesus did have this expectation, even to the point of telling one of the thieves being crucified next to him that on that day he would be with him in paradise, the hope and the expectation of that did nothing to diminish the suffering that he endured on the cross.

However, because of Jesus' suffering and death, we can know beyond any doubt that God is very near in our distress. When we hurt, Jesus understands.

Every time we have a complaint we want to be heard. We want someone to help us. We want to have hope that things are going to get better.

Sometimes, our circumstances may not change. Other times they may not.

God did not deliver Jesus from the cross. However, that did not mean there was not hope.

One of the lessons from Palm Sunday is that God wants us to take our complaints to him. God will hear us.

In fact, God encourages us to cry out to him, to pour out our hearts to him. God hears us. Sometimes God changes our situation, which brings us hope. Other times, the situation might not change, but what God may change is us. God may give us the grace, strength, and courage to help us carry the cross we must bear.

So, go ahead and complain. God is listening. God cares.

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