

“If I hear any more complaining, I am going to pull this car over and” ... How do you end that sentence? I am not sure I ever had to. Just the threat bought a few more minutes of quiet on the long trip. People in authority, whether parents, teachers or presidents have had their patience tested by complainers. Their response is revealing. Will they explode in anger, punish the whiners, tweet, or show patience and empathy? Later we will consider what Israel’s testing of the Lord revealed about him.

Thousands of years later, with the comforts of modern day life, it is tempting to look down on those ungrateful whining Israelites. When our children cry out in the night for water, we walk a few steps, turn on the faucet, or push the refrigerator lever for cold water and give them their water. Job accomplished! But what were those Israelite mothers and fathers to do when their babies were crying out with thirst in the desert far from any water? When your very survival is on the line, would you trust the Lord any more than they did? Would you not also be tempted to complain?

Put yourself in their sandals. The Israelites had been slaves for ten generations. What that does to national identity and confidence doesn’t go away overnight. These, were after all, real human beings like us. Suddenly they are free? What’s the catch? When is the other shoe going to drop? When will you awaken from this dream? A little empathy would help us understand why this complaint was often repeated, “In Egypt we had food and water. Have you brought us out into the desert to die?” Freedom was too new to think it could last. They were not well practiced in walking by faith.

Doubt is a stubborn thing. It fuels our fear and sounds off with complaints. So stubborn was theirs that it persisted even after the Lord had rescued them from slavery with ten plagues, opened the Sea as an escape route and closed it up on the Egyptian army, had provided an oasis to refresh them at Elim, had made bitter water drinkable, and had rained down bread from heaven in the morning and quail in the evening. Yet, now on the brink of dying from thirst, their doubts returned as well as their complaints.

They were tested again later at this same mount Horeb, also called Sinai, which Moses ascended for 40 days to receive the Ten Commandments. Again they complained. Where is Moses? Where is God? Let’s make a golden calf and call it the god that brought us out of Egypt. They were still in slavery, imprisoned by their lack of faith. Here the Lord was not as patient. Complaining against God because you are in distress is one thing. Replacing God because you no longer trust him enough to even complain to, is quite another thing.

Here at Rephidim, they are thirsty, and believe, in spite of all previous evidence, that they are going to die. Has human nature changed all that much? Lifelong witnesses of God’s faithfulness are less inclined to doubt. Those newer to the faith might be more easily tempted to doubt when life does not go the way Joel Osteen promises. But even the most faithful are susceptible to complaining when tested by life’s hardships. Everything from marriage to politics, personal finances, health, and parenting challenges can tempt us to wonder if God is still with us. We are not always so trusting.

While the nature of human beings hasn’t changed, the Good News is that neither has the nature of God. He is ever patient and merciful in our distress. He did not say to the Israelites, “If you don’t stop whining, I am going to make your horses and oxen lame, so you will have to pull your own wagons.” Or “I am going to pull this caravan over and give you something to complain about.” Instead, He took pity on them. Just as he saved them from through the water of the Red Sea, he would again save them by water from the rock.

1400 years later Paul calls this Rock in the desert Jesus. He was present with them. In quenching their physical thirst, He foreshadowed the quenching of our spiritual thirst, the longing for life and peace with God. Moses led them to the Promised Land, as Christ leads us to heaven. Their doubts made that journey more difficult, but they got there eventually. Were it not for the mercy of God in Christ, our sinful doubts would bar the pathway to Paradise altogether.

Water again signifies our salvation. As it flowed from the rock, so with the blood it flowed from side of Jesus, our rock, as he died on the cross. His sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins was complete. In baptismal water, God applies this sacrifice to us personally.

What does our complaining reveal about God? Amazing mercy. He did not insist we stop whining as a condition of rescuing us from the bondage of sin. Jesus told the woman at the well, “I have water of eternal life for you. I offer it freely, not because you deserve it, but because you need it. Only I can give it.” In today’s epistle, you heard that while we were still sinners and enemies of God, Christ died for us, not demanding first that we shape up.

Later in Romans Paul gives us a wonderful insight to help us resist the temptation to doubt. *“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”* When we have a hard time trusting God when life is hard, remember that He has already freed us from bondage to sin and has already promised us a place in heaven. Since He has done that, He is not going to leave us to die in the wilderness on our way there. He is faithful to the end. Amen.