

Wait Training: No Whining!

Exodus 15:22-27

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So—let’s start with a softball: how many of you have had enough of COVID-19? Enough of masks and social distancing and official mandates and talking heads? Anyone? EVERY hand is raised—and I’ll bet that’s true for you at home, too. Go ahead—tell us in chat.

Well, I’m with you. I’ve had enough. BUT—it seems we are not yet done with this journey. We still have a while to wait. And how many love waiting? Nope. Me neither. But sometimes—we have no choice. Like now. And like the people of Israel in the story of Exodus. They waited a lot. But the good news is—God uses waiting to train and shape his people.

So, for the next five weeks, we are going to do some “wait-training.” We are going to look at and learn from the ways God used Israel’s wanderings to prepare them to be his covenant people. Wouldn’t it be great if WE could learn from their mistakes so that, at the end of COVID-19 we will look back and say, “Wow—the Lord really taught me some important lessons this past year.”

One of the lessons I think God would teach us is this: No Whining! Are there any whiners listening? Maybe a little bit? If so, you are in GREAT company with the Israelites. They were the whiniest bunch of people that ever came down the pike. They loved to grumble. And not just once in a while. The Israelites turned grumbling into a national past time. Let’s take a look.

Last week, we recalled that epic moment in Israel’s history when God separated the waters of the Red Sea, led Israel across on dry land, and then caused those walls of water to come crashing down on Pharaoh’s army. One moment, Israel was in a death trap; —and in the next moment, God swallows up their enemies.

When the Israelites got to the other side and turned to watch God’s awesome handiwork, they could hardly believe their eyes. And then, led by Moses, they broke into song. (Ex.15)

Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble. At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up; the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? —You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

Those are just a few stanzas of longer song, but you catch the flavor of it.. This moment of celebration—when two million voices were lifted to the Lord in praise for his deliverance — was so significant that the writer of Exodus captured it for posterity. There are no other songs in Exodus—but this one he captured. Finally, the people of Israel understand who God is. Finally, they know that the God who SENT Moses, who SENT the ten plagues and who DESTROYED Pharaoh’s army—.is trustworthy and powerful and capable of caring for his people—no matter what. Finally, lesson learned! Right?

Would that it were so! Their confidence in God’s power and provision didn’t last long. Because the VERY NEXT story in chapter 15 goes like this:

[The people of Israel] went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter—And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?”

So God does a miracle through Moses and sweetens the water. But the grumbling doesn’t stop. It never stops. In the next chapter we read,

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

God responded to their grumbling by providing manna in the morning— literal bread from heaven— and quail in the evening. Maybe NOW the people will believe that God will provide all their needs? NOPE. In the NEXT chapter we read,

But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

God told Moses to strike a rock with his staff and, miraculously, water came flowing out. But it wasn't enough. It was never enough. For the rest of their journey through the wilderness, the people grumbled. In fact, it was their grumbling that finally, after 40 years of wandering, disqualified them from entering the Promised Land.

I lead tours to the Holy Land. After one unpleasant trip—with one very unpleasant woman—I developed the Toone Tour Rules. Everyone memorizes these rules and we live by them. Here they are: Punctuality, Jocularly, Flexibility, Humility—and the last and most memorable of the five—NO WHINING! In fact, someone gave me this gift that hangs above my office door. Thou Shalt Not Whine!"

Whining is a divisive, discouraging, pointless, fruitless and SINFUL behavior. It is bad for marriage, bad for family, bad at work, bad in church and bad for your soul. But I'll bet—even among you non-whiners—the last few months have ratcheted up the whine factor in your own home. Am I right? It has in ours. Whining has got to go. It has no place among God's people.

Now I want to be clear: there are times when it is appropriate to speak of our discontent. One-third of the psalms are "Psalms of Lament." The writer cries out in agony to the Lord. He is sad, scared, hopeless. There is nothing wrong with telling God the truth about how we feel. Nor is it wrong to bring a grievance to someone else. Jesus taught us if we had an offense against someone, we were to go straight to that person and tell them the truth.

But whining is NEITHER lament nor grievance. It isn't laying our pain before the Lord because we need his help—nor is it laying a complaint before a brother in order to be reconciled. Whining is simply complaining for the sake of complaining. Perhaps it rises out of self-pity or entitlement or fear. Perhaps it soothes us in an odd way—but that relief never lasts. When we whine, we romanticize our past, we dramatize our present, we antagonize our friends and worst of all, we minimize our God. Whining is one of the "acceptable" sins—but it can be more destructive and divisive than some of its more notorious relatives.

So—what are we to do about it? Paul says, "Do everything without grumbling—" How do we obey that admonition? I'd like to return to the text from which Gunnar spoke so powerfully last week. Because I think we find four disciplines the Lord uses to make us

a less grumbly people: Lift your eyes, Shut your mouth, Take one step forward, and Keep singing.

First, Lift your eyes. When the people were trapped before the Red Sea, we are told that they “—lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly.” They “lifted up their eyes.” Only problem is, they didn’t lift them high enough. They lifted their eyes only high enough to see their problem. They looked at the soldiers, the chariots, the war horses— all they could see was trouble. They needed to lift their eyes higher. Off of the troubles and onto the God who, again and again, had proven his love for them, his faithfulness to them, and his power over them. Part of the cure for grumbling is to fill our eyes—our minds— our souls with the goodness of God. Soak in his word. Remember his kindness toward us. Remember his faithfulness toward us. Lift your eyes OFF your problems—and up to our great God.

Lift your eyes—and shut your mouth. Do you remember what Moses said to his grumbling people before God delivered them across the Red Sea? “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” I don’t want us to miss that last part! Just be quiet! If you catch yourself grumbling about how hard things are right now—and if there is nothing redemptive or hopeful about what you are saying—maybe you ought to stop staying it! If we could beg the Holy Spirit to help us shut our mouths sooner and more often—a lot of the division, dissension and fear would never be sown in the first place. I literally caught myself doing this the other day. I was on a rant—and I caught myself and said, out loud, “I’m not going to talk about this anymore. It is doing no good for anyone.” Ask HS to help you control your mouth!

Lift your eyes, shut your mouth and take one step forward. I get this from verse 15: The Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward.” In other words, God was saying, “I’ve heard your prayers, I’ve told you what to do—let’s stop talking about it and start doing!” Sometimes we whine because it’s easier to complain than it is to do something about it. You know you need marriage counseling but it’s easier to whine about your husband or wife. You know you need to get your drinking under control but it’s easier to whine about your issues than go to Celebrate Recovery. You know you need a job change but it’s easier to whine than to get the training you need for a new career.

Sometimes we don’t know what God wants us to do; what course to take. But often, our problem is not that we don’t know what God wants; it’s that we don’t want to DO what God wants. Our path forward is clear; we just don’t want to take it.

“But wait a second,” you might protest. “This series is called, “Wait-Training.” We are learning how to wait on the Lord. How does this point fit?” Because, “waiting” doesn’t mean “paralysis.” In our story, the people were told to go forward. But forward in this case didn’t mean “Promised Land.” It meant just through the Red Sea. It wasn’t the whole journey; but it was an essential next step in the journey. Waiting isn’t always doing nothing; sometimes, waiting is doing just the next best thing. Is there a step forward you need to take even now?

For Cyndi and me, our next step was civic participation. We donated to a candidate and even did some sign-waving, something we’ve never done before. We knew we couldn’t keep whining about the state of our state if we weren’t willing to do something. For you, your next step might be serving in a way you’ve never served before. Sending a virtual care package to World Relief Haiti, assembling a compassion kit for the Rescue Mission or signing up to work at the FISH Food Bank. Go to chapelhillpc.org/onestepforward and find out ways you can translate an instinct to grumble into an act of grace.

Lift your eyes, shut your mouth, take one step forward and finally, as an antidote to whining— “Keep on singing.” I’ve always thought it was curious that this long song of Moses was included in the middle Exodus. It seemed like it should be in the psalms. So, why this one? Why here? I think it’s because— this was Israel at their best! Fresh off of a miraculous salvation by the Lord, their trust in him would never be stronger. Their hope for their future would never be brighter. Their perception of who God was would never be clearer. And so they sang—

Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?...You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode—. You will bring [your people] in and plant them on your own mountain— The Lord will reign forever and ever.

They got it! In that moment of worship, they got it! It was their finest hour. But oh, if they had only kept singing that song! If, when they became thirsty, they worshiped instead of grumbling. If, when they became hungry, they worshiped instead of grumbling, if when they became frightened or tired or lonely or worn out—they had raised their hands in praise instead of their fist in accusation—what difference might that have made? The only reason they wandered 40 years was that God was trying to train them to be his people; to trust him, to rely on him, to love him as he loved them. But no matter what he did, it was never enough.

Alas, they never did trust him. And you know what God did? He kept his covenant anyway. He kept loving, kept protecting, kept guiding, kept saving. They certainly didn't deserve it, those whiny Israelites. But that is the nature of our gracious God. He keeps loving, keeps protecting, keeps guiding, keeps saving. And we know this better than Israel because we have seen their promise fulfilled—the gift of Jesus who was the living water, who was the bread of life, who was the better Moses. Jesus gave us perfectly everything that Israel only tasted of. We have far more reason to sing than they.

So—beloved—keep singing! Keep worshiping every week. If it is safe for you, come back in person; you will be so blessed to hear the singing of brothers and sisters again. Come join our “Kingdom Come” prayer and worship on August 18! Change your radio channel. I'm listening to less news and more Christian music. The greatest antidote to grumbling is to lift that voice up in praise to God. Surely—even in this time—there is something you can name that is praiseworthy.

So here's mine. Here's the song I sing right now. I'm going to be a grandpa—and it's going to be a little girl. Cooper and Deb are having a little girl. I'm telling you, son—from personal experience—that little girl is going to have you wrapped around her finger—just as mine still does. Family—a gift of God worth singing about.

My beloved, sweetheart church. You've always been resilient. You've endured hard things in the past and come out stronger. God has always had his hand on you—and he will never let you go. He will bring us through this. Believe that. Speak of that. Sing of that.