

Complaining or Lamenting?

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We live in a society that feeds on complaining. When we have to wait for our food at a restaurant, we complain. Angry parents shout at school boards. When we are not satisfied with our latest Amazon purchase, we write negative reviews. We complain about the weather. We complain about inflation.

We always find ways to justify our complaining. After all, an entire book of the Bible is called “Lamentations!” Right?

Wrong!

Complaining and lamenting are two completely different forms of expression. They stem from different perspectives. They have different results. Let’s notice the differences.

About Complaining...

1. Complaining is an expression of ingratitude. Complaining blinds us from seeing the grace of God in our lives. We fail to acknowledge the many blessings we have in our lives. Ingratitude was a major factor that contributed to the rejection of God: “...when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Rom. 1:21).

2. Complaining reveals selfishness and entitlement. Why do we complain when we have to wait for our food at a restaurant? Why do we rant on social media about something we do not like? Why do we grumble when a situation is not resolved in our favor? Selfishness. We think the world is to bend to our inclinations. We think we are owed whatever we want whenever we want it. We work hard; therefore, life should work to our advantage.

3. Complaining shows discontent. The grace of God is intended to bring us peace and fulfillment; whereas, selfishness breeds discontent. The apostle Paul experienced setbacks and hardships; yet, he found contentment: “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:11-13).

4. Complaining demonstrates a lack of trust. Israel was rebuked and punished for complaining to God. Their murmuring questioned God’s love for them. When confronted with hardships during the Exodus, they expressed regret for leaving Egypt: “When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave

us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness" (Exod. 14:10-12).

5. Complaining pushes us away from God. The example of Israel complaining in the wilderness highlights this consequence of complaining. They did not turn to God to save them. Instead, they wanted to return to Egypt: "And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt" (Num. 14:2-4).

About Lamentation...

1. Lamentation is an expression of deep sorrow and anguish. Lamentation is not the expression of a trivial annoyance. Nor, is it an arrogant indictment of God. Sickness, suffering, and death stir lamentation. These tragic events of the human experience do not begin to compare with "the waiter brought me the wrong food!" or "they shipped me the wrong size!"

For example, Jeremiah wrote the book entitled "Lamentations." He poetically expresses anguish as his nation has been invaded by the Babylonians. He articulates the deprivation caused by the siege. The tongues of infants stick to the roof of their dry mouths for lack of drink and women have boiled their children for food (Lam. 4:4, 10). The weeping prophet witnessed the worst of what humanity has to offer.

2. Lamentation is born from faith in God. Whether Jeremiah or one of the psalmists, lamentation comes from a strong faith in God. Such expressions attempt to find understanding and meaning in present suffering. Lamentation finds peace in knowing that eventually God will set the world aright.

Surprisingly, one of the most hopeful expressions of faith in the Bible was written in Lamentations: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him" (Lam. 3:21-24).

3. Lamentation draws us closer to God. The world is chaotic, unpredictable, and unfair. The only reliable source of direction, fulfillment, and hope is God. He alone can provide for us in our darkest hour.

The Bible gives us tools to help cope with even the worst experiences in life. Lamentation is designed to help us process our suffering and draw us closer to God. This is why psalms of lament end with an expression of hope in God (i.e. Psa. 13).

Conclusion

I have a complaint: we complain too much! Complaining is not productive or constructive. Complaining does not improve our well-being. Complaining undermines our faith and spreads like a virus. Let us learn from Israel and resolve to do all things without complaining (Phil. 2:14-15).

When non-trivial events occur in our lives, events that tests our love and faith, let us lament. Lamentation is a healthy process by which we can express our plight without losing our faith. Lamentation enables us to feel anguish, find stability, and persevere with the hope that God will make everything right.