

EXODUS: CHECK YOUR ATTITUDE!

By Andrew Wilson
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Exodus 16:1-3, 11-20
Philippians 4:4-7

My brother Jeff and his family recently sent me this birthday card. The front picture is of two kids looking out the back window of an old car moving down the road. It says:

Happy 50th! Remember when you went places as a kid and you always asked, “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?”

Inside it says: “You’re there.”

I got another birthday card that really touched me. This one was signed, “Your family and friends at LCPC” – I guess that’s all of you. There are five tens on the front, and inside there’s a surprise: [*plays “We Are the Champions”*].

As I’ve always told Lee, you just can’t get too much Queen...

The Israelites are finally there – or at least they’re finally on their way. Standing on the shore, looking at the bodies of the Egyptian soldiers that have washed up on the shore, they look and feel like the champions.

Israel’s victory anthem is found in Exodus, chapter 15. Having been delivered through the water, the people sing:

“The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name;
Pharaoh’s chariots and his army
he has hurled into the sea...
“In your unfailing love
you will lead the people you have redeemed.
In your strength you will guide them
to your holy dwelling.”
- Exodus 15:1, 13

But sadly, the thrill of victory doesn’t last. Within three short days, the Israelites experience their first major crisis in the wilderness. And they immediately start singing the blues.

I’m reading now from Exodus 15, starting at verse 22. The people have just finished their victory celebration:

For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. [Marah means “bitter” in Hebrew.] ...So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?”

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.
- Exodus 15:22-24

So once again, God comes through for Moses. The people prove that they still don't trust either Moses or the Lord, but God saves them anyway.

That's the background to the story we just read. Exactly one month has passed since Israel's deliverance. The Israelites have again run out of food and water, and this time they seem to be on the edge of despair. They've forgotten all about the signs and wonders and miracles that God employed to secure their freedom. They've stopped thinking about the Promised Land. Things look so bad to them that they've actually started to pine for their old life in Egypt.

They gripe to Moses and Aaron:

"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 into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

- Exodus 16:3

It's hard to be sympathetic to the Israelites because we see the big picture. We know the people weren't sitting around pots eating their fill of filet mignon when they were slaves in Egypt. Instead they were eating tiny rations of mashed grain and were going to bed hungry every night.

But still, we have to keep in mind that the Israelites truly are in dire straights. They have no homeland. They can't go back to Egypt. They're stuck in a desert wasteland every bit as harsh as our own Mojave Desert, and there are tens of thousands of them struggling to live off the land. Would we have behaved any differently in similar circumstances?

God doesn't become angry with the people when they turn on Moses and throw in the towel. Instead, he suddenly and miraculously provides them with more than enough to eat. According to a plan that he reveals to Moses, God causes flocks of quail to come into the Israelite's camp in the evening, and a sweet, flaky substance to appear on the ground with the morning dew. The people don't know what the flaky substance is so they call it manna, which in Hebrew means, "What is it?" But they're soon gulping down their manna every morning as many of us gulp down our Frosted Flakes or our Honey Bunches of Oats.

God establishes several commandments regarding the gathering and eating of the breakfast flakes.

The first commandment is that the people are to gather no more than an omer, or about two liters of flakes for each member of their family each morning.

By the way, there's a word you can use to impress people with your biblical knowledge. The next time you're at a party point to a two liter bottle and say to someone: "Would you mind passing me that omer of coke?"

You laugh, but that's actually how Lee met his wife Nikki. He asked her to pass the omer; they got into a deep conversation about weights and measurements in the ancient world; and now they're married...

The second commandment that God lays down is that the people aren't allowed to store up their breakfast flakes. If they keep them overnight, the next morning they'll stink and be filled with maggots.

The third and the most important commandment is the one establishing the Sabbath rest. God says that he'll send no manna to the people on the seventh day because he doesn't want them to work on that day. They're to provide for their needs on the day of rest by gathering twice as much as they need on the sixth day and storing what they don't eat overnight. God promises to preserve their manna on the seventh day so that it won't spoil as it would if it were kept overnight on any other day.

Not surprisingly, some of the people refuse to follow these simple commandments. They don't understand them, and they're curious to see exactly what will happen if they violate them. They're like the little kid who can't keep himself from pressing the red button with the sign over it that says: "Danger – don't touch!" I understand those people because I *am* that little kid.

Some of the people gather extra omers of breakfast flakes and kept them in their tents overnight. They all wake up to maggots a-plenty.

Others go out on the seventh day – the Sabbath day – to see if manna has appeared. They don't find any, of course, and Moses gets ticked off and rebukes them once again for doubting God's word.

One of the things we learn from these stories is that the Israelites have a major attitude problem. God has given the people every reason to trust him. He has delivered them from a living death and put them on the road to freedom. He has guided them and provided for their every need. Yet whenever they're subjected to any kind of danger or deprivation, they immediately start to whine, complain, grumble and kvetch.

It isn't hard to diagnose the problem: The Israelites are still thinking and acting like slaves. Physically speaking, they've been delivered from Egypt. But most of them are still living in bondage. They're still confined by a defeatist mentality that says: "I'm disappointed with life, and I'm entitled to feel that way." When something good happens they see the half-empty glass. When something bad happens they expect things to get worse. When things don't go exactly the way they want them to go, they become resentful. And when they fail in their basic duties, they quickly find some else to blame.

As strange as these ancient stories are, they speak directly to one of the greatest problems plaguing our society. Today we face an epidemic of whininess. Millions of people are caught in cycles of negative thinking that affect every aspect of their lives, most importantly their relationship with God.

Some of those people have experienced childhood wounds that they have carried with them into adulthood. Their struggles with unhappiness are rooted in responses and learned behaviors that they have trouble identifying, let alone changing.

Others have developed the habit of complaining endlessly to their friends at work or to their spouse or to their children. Some people have been unloading on others so long that they no longer realize they're doing it. They think of whining as a form of therapy – something you do to relieve stress and help you cope, like jogging or talking to a counselor. They're mostly oblivious to the damage they're doing to themselves and to their family and friends because of their chronic carping.

I recently read a letter by a chronic complainer that was written to a well-known psychologist. It's a letter of regret by a person who became aware of her problem after many years of living in the dark.

Can you stand another letter about regrets? Well, here is mine. I am sitting here at three o'clock in the morning typing you because I feel if I can save one person from making all the dumb mistakes I did it will be worth it. My kids are on vacation with their dad and I won't see them for nine days and the reason I'm not with them is my fault and mine alone.

...I decided... that my husband was demanding and mean, that he would never change. I was not going to waste my life on someone who would not meet all my emotional needs.

Well, you guessed it, I whined, I griped, I complained, and then I fell emotionally in love with someone who was not available to me in any sense of the word. I would show my husband, I told myself. I would find someone better than him.

And guess what, I am sitting in my house alone at three o'clock in the morning missing my kids and the life I used to have. It wasn't perfect, but it was my life.

I once got a fortune cookie that said, "Stop searching, happiness is right next to you." How I wish I would have taken those words to heart.... I would give anything to go back in time and change the decisions I made...

There's nothing harder in the world than to look in the mirror and admit your mistakes. It takes a lot of humility and courage to confess to God and to the people close to you that you need an attitude adjustment. But there's really no other way out of the hole. There's no other path to liberation. True freedom always begins with an honest self-examination.

Not all complaining is destructive and unhealthy. There are times in our lives when we need to blow off steam by grumbling. If we're hurt by other people it can help to enumerate grievances and point out injustices. If we're get sick, or we lose a job, or we experience failure in our work, we need to find a way to talk about it, and maybe even stew about it for a few days.

But then we need to find a way to stop our griping and move on. The pull of the dark side is always powerful in our lives, but we can't allow ourselves to be drawn in for very long. We have to find our way back to the light. Like Moses in the desert, we have to entrust our future to God and walk with him by faith.

For many years I organized wilderness canoe trips for senior highs in the North Woods of Ontario and Minnesota. One year I decided to put together a special trip just for junior highs. Some of our advisors thought I was nuts, but I forged ahead. Eventually I recruited a team of about 28 students and advisors. Three or four of the kids looked like they were in the fourth grade.

After about half an hour on the water most of the kids were whining and complaining. The route we were taking wasn't exactly easy, and I immediately started to worry about both their physical and mental stamina. So I laid down a set of rules designed to protect the weaker paddlers. I told everyone that during portages – that's when you carry your gear, including your canoes, over land, between lakes or rivers – during portages all paddlers would be responsible for carrying only what they felt they could personally manage. That meant that if you could carry a canoe, you and a friend might have to return for a second canoe. But if you were small and could manage

only a pack, you shouldn't feel guilty about only carrying a pack or two. I also said that anyone feeling sick should take it easy and carry only paddles and life jackets across the portages.

The result of this benevolent code of behavior was a total breakdown in the wilderness. Hardly anyone, it seemed, could manage a canoe. I was carrying an average of five canoes at each portage. Although no one actually vomited, an alarming number of kids claimed to be sick.

The leadership team had an emergency meeting. We considered going back, and not completing our loop, but we had already completed nearly half the trip when the meltdown occurred.

In a fit of anger and desperation, I rallied the armada. I remember I was standing on a tiny rock that protruded from the lake, about 30 feet off shore, so that I looked like Jesus standing on the water. I can't remember exactly what I said, though I do remember using the words "wimps" and "crybabies" once or twice.

I concluded my tirade by laying down a new law – one that sent a shudder down the kids' spines. I said, "From this moment on, you and your canoe partner are responsible for your canoe, and everything in it. You and your partner will take everything across all the remaining portages. The rule applies to everyone –seventh graders, sick people, everybody. No exceptions. Now let's get moving."

What was the result of this heartless policy? Mutiny? Mayhem? Just the opposite. Within an hour, the sun began to shine on that trip. Kids lugged their canoes, toted their packs, and paddled the lakes without complaint. As the day wore on, many began to laugh and joke. The eighth grade boys even stopped smacking frogs with their paddles. Instead of blaming their leaders for dragging them through the swamp, they gained a new sense of confidence. And instead of focusing on their minor aches and pains, they began to appreciate the spectacular scenery that surrounded them.

Why the sudden change? The answer is obvious: the members of our team were forced to take responsibility for themselves. Because they were prohibited from leaning on others, the kids began to do what they thought they couldn't do. The simple act of shouldering their own load led to a total transformation in attitude and perspective. For many of them, that experience was absolutely exhilarating.

Life is a journey, and we all have burdens to bear and portages to cross. But our happiness isn't dependent on what happens to us along the way. Our attitude is far more important than our circumstances in determining whether we live a satisfying, fulfilling and productive life. And attitude is something we choose. We can choose to whine and complain our way through every challenge. Or we can choose to trust God and do our part to make the world a better place.

The Good News of the Gospel is that the Lord lives. Christ has given us his Spirit – the spirit of courage – and we who love him have become victors and champions. That's why the advice that Paul gives to the church at Philippi has such relevance for us today:

Rejoice in the Lord always! [Paul writes from his dark prison cell]. I will say it again: Rejoice! ... The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

- Philippians 4:4-7