

Introduction

Christian people have questions. The darkness of approaching death, the fear of financial futility, the mess of difficult marriages, the wreck of unfulfilling work – long is the list of those things that bring people, even God's people, to despair. Add to this the relentless pressures and grievous sinfulness of our day, and sometimes it is all too much.

For some, the sense of anxiety, the fearsomeness of life, leads to panic attacks – shortness of breath, tightness in the chest, clammy sweating fear and inward horror.

Christian people are not exempt from all this. In the struggle to grow in grace and walk with Christ, there are many kinds of deep and dark valleys. In these valleys – in these times of intense difficulty, we have questions. We even have complaints. We are troubled by what is going on and our own passions in the midst of it. And there is no darkness like that which comes when we cannot seem to find God. We are so bent to believe the certainties of our difficulty that we flirt with despair. The slow fire of our misery consumes us leaving ashes and smoke in place of our joy.

In David's writings we find heights of soaring delights and plunges of painful questions enough to sustain us and send us soaring even in suffering. Knowing the *what* of his life - the wrenching circumstances surrounding the outpouring of his soul in a Psalm - will help us to draw help and hope from them. When we resonate with the experiences of his hardship, we can better know how to come to our God with hearts that are ruled by our discontents moving to hearts that are ravished by our Redeemer and Ruler.

In some sense we are all sufferers. We are people ravaged by the hardness of our fallen world, the hatefulness of sinful people and the desperate bewilderment of unexpected obstacles. We all need two things: hope and help. So, God has placed helpers in our lives. They come to us in comfort, in counsel and in call. They offer the Spirit's fruit as succulent nourishment in drought and famine. They offer the loving words of God spoken through earthen vessels so that the good for us is glory for God. They also may, with strong words of truth accompanied by mighty deeds of love, call us to heart change.

This series will help you to think about complaining. It is sometimes difficult to know what God of complaining God accepts, God forbids and even incurs the anger of God. We will be looking at several texts that speak to the issue. God's people can be and often are, complainers. We have marvelous and magnificent ways of excusing ourselves and explaining it away. But the Bible presses home the sin of complaining while in some way, leaving open the ability to come honestly before God in our troubles.

Frankly, this is not a series you will profit from if you hear a portion of it. You will the whole story. I pray you will give it your full attention.

Where is God? I want to Complain

Psalm 142

Pastor Russ Kennedy

Hear the Word of God...

¹ With my voice I cry out to the LORD;
with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD.

² I pour out my complaint before him;
I tell my trouble before him.

³ When my spirit faints within me,
you know my way!
In the path where I walk
they have hidden a trap for me.

⁴ Look to the right and see:
there is none who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for my soul.

⁵ I cry to you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my refuge,
my portion in the land of the living."

⁶ Attend to my cry,
for I am brought very low!
Deliver me from my persecutors,
for they are too strong for me!

⁷ Bring me out of prison,
that I may give thanks to your name!
The righteous will surround me,
for you will deal bountifully with me.

The internet is a great place to shop. You can view what you are thinking of buying to your heart's content. You can roam through the virtual aisles of stores, pick up items and put them on a shelf. You can bring them over from other stores or other items of a different brand, put them on your shelf and compare them in excruciating detail. Finally, you make your purchase. You are sure it is right. You have done your research. You add it to your shopping basket and press the "Check Out" button. You supply your method of payment then select your shipping method. And now, you wait.

A few days later, your item arrives. You hurry to your table, get out your knife and cut the tape holding the box. Out comes... Oh, no. It is not what you ordered. And worse, it is not even new! The packaging has obviously been resealed. You open it, take out your item and now you know why it was returned and now sent to you.

So, time to get back on-line to the store and try to send it back. You did not get what you wanted and got something else instead. You have anticipated receiving what you ordered and now you have something different. You are not happy. You want to register a complaint. You want to get what you really wanted. So where are you going to go to make your complaint? You ordered in a virtual world, but now you want a real person. Good luck! Now starts the frustrating process of settling your complaint.

Our lives are like that. We have expectations and hopes. We want or don't want something with enough passion. We long for what we don't have. Our kids are a disappointment. Our spouse is not measuring up. The food at the restaurant is not up my standard. The church is not what I want it to be. Why can't this be like that? Now, we reach a point where we say, "Where is God? I want to register a complaint." This is where David is in this Psalm. Listen to its words.

The Difficulties that Shape our Complaints

Our complaints are provoked by our situations. Events happen that we cannot seem to understand. Troubles pile up like tumbled rocks. We have trouble making sense of what is going on. Soon we have difficult questions in the midst of the mess.

This Psalm was written out of the incredible circumstances described in 1 Samuel 22:1-5. The problems and pains David is experiencing have been relentless. He has been anointed the next king of Israel. He has successfully fought Israel's enemies, incurring the hatred and fear of Saul, the God-rejected king. He has had to flee for his life. As a weapon for his defense, he has been given the sword of Goliath. He escaped first to Gath in the land of the Philistines. There, trying to disguise himself, he pretended to be insane, drooling at the mouth and talking to himself. Then in humiliation, he was exposed and expelled. He ends up hiding in a cave in Adullam, southwest of Bethlehem. So, the next king of Israel, the sweet singer of Psalms, sets up headquarters in a cavern.

There his family comes to him – his brothers and other relatives. We do not know whether this was delightfully comforting or just more deeply concerning. Day after day the debtors, the distressed and the discontent trickle in. What a lovely lot. The word is out – here is a man to be followed, to give your dying loyalty to. Yet what can he offer them? Can he pay their debts? Can he answer their financial distress or give them physical comfort? No, but here was a man loving God and walking with God who is deeply real about his trials and troubles. As they began to flock to him and to follow him, they became a cadre of fiercely loyal and powerfully competent warriors.

Then to add to his distress, his family is endangered due to his own dreadful position and their devoted identification with him. In front of the king of Moab, he pled for a place of refuge and safety for them. There he expresses the hardness of his difficulty. "Would you let my father and mother live here under your royal protection until I know what God is going to do for me?" It is no wonder we hear words like, "I am overwhelmed."

Realistically, none of us has faced these same circumstances. Few of us in the west have had to run for our lives, disguise ourselves, or hide our families away, all the while

knowing we have been designated to replace the very person who is persecuting us. No, I think not.

But our own difficulties and distresses are no less real to us. It is not the enormity of the challenge in the larger picture, but its overwhelming weight in the moment. We feel bowed, beaten and broken. We are bowed by the crushing burden of our responsibilities and the relentless pressures of life and living. We are beaten down by being sinned against – others who do evil and prosper at our expense. We are broken by harsh randomness of deadly disease and debilitating illness. Now I am giving great credit here. Frankly, most of us are complaining about small, insignificant stuff. Our food, the seat, our wait, it is too hot. It is too cold. Why so slow? Why so fast? Why this again? On and on runs the songs of our discontent.

Yet we have real questions and complaints. Where is God in all this? What will he do for me?

Now this leads to a fundamental question: is it ever right for a Christian to complain? Is this the wrong word for what we are doing when we bring our perplexities and our questions to God?

Israel was a grumbling, complaining people who wore out their leadership and wearied their God with constantly dripping dissatisfactions. God often moved with powerfully frightening anger against their complaining. They grumbled at manna, at travel, at thirst, at Moses and among themselves. (Exodus 16:4-12; Numbers 14:26-30; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:10).

Then the New Testament, specifically pointing to that grumbling, warns us in 1 Corinthians 10:10 that we are not to grumble and complain. We are to do all things without grumbling and complaining (Philippians 2:14). We are not to complain against one another (James 5:9). And we are to forgive those who have a complaint against us (possibly a different use of the word in Colossians 3:13). Finally, we are warned how grumblers and complainers tend to practice all sorts of evil (Jude 1:16). So, in the face of this, why is not Lamentations 3:39 just the final word on complaining?

Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins?

There is a deep difference between the forbidden complaining by God's people and the kind of honest questioning of the Psalmist. The difference is in the heart. In complaining there is a heart dissatisfied with God and His provisions. In the other there is genuine perplexity at the seeming distance between what God has said and what is actually going on. Who God has said He is, along with what He has said He will do, jars against the present circumstances of His providence. The underlying attitude of genuine God-pleasing questions is that of humble honesty.

Our Experience of our Troubles

Our questions never arise merely from the facts of our situations. We experience those situations – we are immersed in the emotions and inner turmoil of them. This is the *how does it feel* of our experience in the midst of difficulty.

Now let us be clear about this. No one simply moves through life without interpreting it. All people try to make sense of life – they have explanations for what is going on. Even “mysterious” is a category of explanation that allows us some measure of comfort with the baffling. Your situation is not just *what happened*, it is also *how understood* and *how interpreted*. What we feel in our emotions responds and reacts to what is happening, directed by, and based on what we believe to be true and false.

This is why we have questions and complaints. We believe certain things to be true and want certain things and we cannot understand how life is different. This becomes excruciating when we are dealing with what we perceive and pursue about God. The struggle with questions is even more difficult for Christians because we know that in some way God is involved with our trouble.

For many, there is an even more difficult place to be. Some have come to the wrong interpretation that a particular set of circumstances and situations must in some way be beyond God’s control – beyond his knowledge. This error is guaranteed to dislocate our hearts and distort our experience.

What do the unfolding events and the situation of his life feel like to David? How does David describe his experience? What Technicolor™ words vividly portray his struggles? What are the personal expressions in his heart?

TROUBLING (v.2)

I am uneasy and anxious. What has happened is trouble and troubling. It is unsettling in my soul. With all that has happened, what could be next?

OVERWHELMED (v.3)

It just feels like too much. I can’t take it anymore. I can’t bear much more. The weight is too much to shoulder. I feel weak and faint on the inside.

DIRECTIONLESS (v.3)

I don’t know where to turn. Where should I go and what should I do next? Why are there no answers, no real “this is the way next”? What traps are set for me next? How do I know what decisions to make? What course will be safe and secure?

LONELINESS (v.4)

I am all alone in this. Who cares for me? Who will take care of me? Why doesn’t someone pay attention to my needs, my pains, my sufferings? Why must I go through this agony isolated and deserted?

VERY LOW (v.6)

This is such a low time in my life. I am sinking under all this. When will I hit the bottom? I cannot see any way up or out.

IMPRISONED (v.6)

I can’t get out of this. The circumstances have me chained, handcuffed, bound. I am all tied up in this – I feel like I am in a dungeon, a prison. When will I be released from all this?

Here is the marvelous realness of the Scripture. The words framing and describing the experience of David in this situation resonate with us. What a difficult time in his life this is. This is how it feels to me too. It is troubling and overwhelming. I have no direction and sometimes I feel helpless, lonely and afraid. It seems I am sinking lower and lower, deeper into a pit. It seems so inescapable.

The Dangers that Accompany our Troubles

Now before we can come to the hope and help of the Word, we need to pay attention to the traps and temptations that attend the times of our perplexities. We tend to deal with those perplexing situations and their experience in ways that are displeasing to God and dangerous to our souls.

Ruling Heart Idols.

Our first vulnerability is to the power of ruling heart idols. If our hearts do not worship God supremely, we will be ruled by whatever pursuit or pleasure we have deemed to be greater than delighting in God. Therefore, we believe error or doubt God in His Word. We crave for relief and rescue rather than desiring God above all in the baffling troubles of living in a fallen world.

In other words, we experience and respond to the perplexing situations of life as servants of the ruling lords in our hearts. Those ruling lords will not only fill us with emotions, but will direct our choices into paths that will displease God. Those idols are an exchange of the glory of uncreated God for the created thing. So not only does the evil heart twist and turn seeking relief, but it seeks for rest and relief in false solutions.

False Promises

In difficult times we are also in danger of putting our trust in false promises. When we doubt God or when we fail to exalt and enjoy Him as our highest gain, we will turn to substitute helps and hopes. In the midst of difficulty and questions we will place our trust in categories of things that may seem to provide relief and rescue. In this text, David's pursuit of genuine trusts and hopes helps us to identify the counterfeits.

FALSE HELPS (v.4)

Our hearts yearn for visible, tangible, present helps, thus making us vulnerable to dependence on man for help. So we look to a Goliath's sword for aid. We turn to people, putting our trust and our hope in them. We hear the world's promises, false and empty, and believe them to be full and strong. We set ourselves up for greater despair and experiences of hopelessness when all our helps turn out to be shadows.

FALSE REFUGES (v.5)

Our hearts avoid exposure to risk and hurt, so we seek refuges what we think will protect us from the trouble, its crises and consequences. We will run to the Gaths and Moabs of our world. We will sometimes even hide from our responsibilities and accountabilities behind feigned madness. So, we may

excuse ourselves by taking refuge in the disease labeled psychologies of our day. Our homes become a fortress in which we hide from engagement with others. We seek safety in our cliques – particularly with those whose perplexities mirror our own. The cyber-world of groups and communities and spaces feel safe and yet are darkly dangerous.

FALSE DELIVERERS (v.6)

Our hearts crave anything that may seem to rescue and deliver us from our situation, rather than helping us to endure through it. Therefore, people with cancer may look to alternative medicines and enmesh themselves in occult powers sometimes connected to them. People with financial trouble will look to debt for deliverance, or even to theft. We associate the place of our trouble with its stress so we move on to somewhere else. We seek to be delivered from the location of our trouble.

FALSE ESCAPES (v.7)

Here is where our diversions function as escapes. The culture's voice speaks loudest here. When the trouble is too great and the problems are too perplexing, go on a vacation. Get away from it all. Seek escape in alcohol, drugs or pleasure. Pull up the covers and sleep. Immerse yourself in video games or see how to survive in TV land. So we have people walking around with the headphones on shutting out the world and escaping into the make-believe of their music. Others escape into fantasizes fed by movies and books. And the worst escapes are the ones with psychological labels. Most of them are like my children playing hide and go seek with me – they cover their eyes and say, "You can't see me."

Hear me well and be warned – there are a whole host of false wisdoms out there that will entice your heart with seemingly compelling words and ways whose end will be bitterness, spiritual emptiness and possibly even death.

The God who Responds in our Difficulty

This whole Psalm pleads, prays, and cries out to God. Though it is a moan of complaint, it is spoken to God. The character of God and His promises are the substance and expectation of this prayer. From a heart ruled by God David places his trust and hope in the God who responds in our difficulty.

It is the character of God that must sustain us while we wrestle before Him with our questions. No matter how hard it may be, the unchanging nature and attributes of God are the solid rock and safe refuge from the beating waves of difficulty and its despair. Like David, we can call out and cling to One like this.

ONE WHO HEARS US

Every sound and word and breath of this Psalm rings with the confidence that God is one who hears the crying and pleading and praying of His people. His ears are open to us. His attention does not wander. He will listen to His people.

ONE WHO HELPS US

If not with outward immediate deliverance, God always helps with deep inward strength. Grace imparted in the inner man provides heartening resources for the fainting times. This help yields a real sense of His Presence with us. Though we are in a fog, we know He is there.

ONE WHO RESCUES US

Our confidence is in this one who will deliver us at just the right moment. In such a way and at such a time best calculated to serve His purposes and demonstrate the stunning and dazzling greatness of His glory, He moves with real power to perform what He has promised.

In the midst of difficulty, we are to cultivate a heart that desires God above all else. Verse 5 is where the complaint turns, not because there are answers from God but because there is a transforming delight in God. The NLT renders it this way, "Then I pray to you, O Lord. I say, 'You are my place of refuge. You are all I really want in life.'" (*New Living Translation, Tyndale*)

So here it is. This is the difference between sinful grumbling and spiritual questions: God is all we really want in life.

Is this true of us? Can we say with any authenticity and integrity that God is our all sufficient and ever satisfying portion in life? But may I challenge you to dare to come to God and express a yearning that this might be so, that in all our perplexities we will long for and pursue after God as an all-consuming passion. I am convinced that this is what makes our difficulty so poignant.

When longing to be satisfied with God – when we seek Him for all He is for us in Christ – then the hardships of life become both sweet and bitter to us. They are sweeter because in them we see a growing Christlikeness. They are more bitter because they taste and smell and feel of the cross. Sweeter in the savoring of Christ and more bitter in sufferings of Christ. Sweeter because they wean us from the world and more bitter because we see our sinfulness in the world. Sweeter because of the gracious hearing God gives to our prayers and more bitter because we ever more know how wasted the days before. So, we come in our praying with our perplexities saying to God, "You are all I really want in life."

Reflect and Respond

When you want to complain to God:

Pray and plead and cry out to God. Seek His face. Look to Him for hope and help.
Bank your trust and bend your desire on Him.

Understand the difference between the situation as it is and how you experience it and respond to it. Know that your heart, what you think and want are the real issues, not your circumstances.

Guard against those false trusts and hopes which will draw you away and will sink out from under you for they will leave you with dust and ashes.

Suck all the sweetness you can out of the bitter hardness of life. Find in God all your help, your refuge and your ever present provider.

When I am perplexed, I will say to my soul and to my Sovereign,
"You are all I want in life."