CHRIST’S CROSS CURBS COMPLAINT by Andy Diestelkamp

The more we study God’s Word, the more we see intentional patterns. Though many err by reading *into* Scripture more than God has revealed or intended, let us not be blind to “whatever things were written before” as they foreshadow God’s eternal plan “that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope”(Rom. 15:4).Thus, examining how God interacted with man (and specifically with the children of Israel) provides us, who claim to be His children, with information that is helpful to our walk with Him.

From its deliverance from slavery in Egypt to its journey to the promised land of rest, the nation of Israel faced challenges which have parallels in our lives. In that exodus and wilderness sojourn are numerous lessons to be learned about faith and perseverance which can help us on our own journeys in this present life.

Complaining comes easy. The demands of life are opportunities for the building of faith and perseverance, yet they are the occasions for many of our complaints. When Moses boldly came to the defense of a fellow Hebrew, no doubt his courage was appreciated. Yet when those characteristics of leadership were applied to a Hebrew *brother*, it was met with complaint (Ex. 2:11-14). We welcome leadership as long as it requires little of us. Leadership is great for correcting the other guy; but when it leads where we do not wish to go, *then* we complain. Forty years later when Moses returned to Egypt to call for Israel’s release from captivity, Pharaoh’s initial response made things harder for Israel and caused many to complain against *Moses* (5:21). When correction, improvement, or reformation of any kind is needed, things often get worse before getting better. These are the times that try men’s souls and reveal the character of those who suffer. These are the times we faithlessly complain.

After Israel plundered Egypt in their exodus, Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued Israel. Israel again complained (14:10-12). Even after God’s mighty deliverance through the Red Sea and the washing away of their oppressors, they complained about lacking water three days later (15:22-24). God knows water! He *does* water. Instead of complaining, why not *ask* Him for water? A month later they complained about food (16:3,4). Are we any different?

Like Israel of old, we “have need of endurance, so that ... [we] may receive the promise” (Heb. 10:36). Like Moses, we need to refuse the passing pleasures of *this* life, choosing instead to suffer with the people of God (11:24,25), “looking unto Jesus ... Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross” (12:2).

When we think of the children of Israel in the wilderness, we see the recurrent theme of God’s *grace* despite their complaining. If you have ever taken a road trip with children, you have experienced this in a small way. “How long ‘til we get there? I’m hungry. I’m thirsty. I need to go. He’s bothering me. She’s leaning on me. I’m bored. *How* long ‘til we get there?” Children often lack appreciation for what they have (modern transportation, climate control, rest areas, snack foods, cloth covered seats, entertainment systems), focus on their discomforts, and impatiently complain. The children of Israel were no different. Forgetting their freedom from bondage and failing to look forward to the Promised Land, their present trials, delays, and uncertainties became the focus of their complaints. Just over three months after their exodus (cf. Ex. 19:1; 24:18), the people became impatient with Moses‘ absence on Mt. Sinai. They complained and turned to idolatry. Though invoking Yahweh’s name, their motives were more about eating, drinking, and playing than worshiping God (32:1-6). Absent the golden calf, much of modern “worship” springs from the same source—the complaints of immature, impatient, and discontent hearts. Beware!

However, the absolute low point for the first generation of freed Israelites was their response to the report of those sent to spy out the promised land. All twelve spies agreed the land was just as promised, “flowing with milk and honey” (33:3; Num. 13:27). However, ten of the twelve spies did not believe Israel was capable of taking the land because of the strength of its inhabitants (vv 28-33). The response of the people was *more* faithless complaining (14:1-4). They said they would have preferred to die in Egypt or in the wilderness rather than fight for what God was graciously giving them. When Joshua and Caleb reminded the people that God was with them, and that they should not fear the Canaanites, “the congregation said to stone them” (vv 6-10). Beware! Faithless complaining drives people to want to kill the faithful messengers who call them back to faith.

God’s response to Israel’s chronic complaining was to suggest disinheriting the entire nation and starting over with Moses (vv 11,12). Moses’ response was to intercede for Israel, begging God to “Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now”(v 19). The uninitiated might see Moses as being more gracious than God; but this would be a failure to look beyond Moses (the shadow) to the grace of the cross of Christ (cf. Dt. 18:15-19; Ac. 3:19-26).