

The Mood That Ruins Worship

Confronting the peril of complaining

Psalm 95:7b-11

Did you know that your emotional life *really matters* to God? Even just a few years ago I would have struggled with that statement. And the reason for that is because it seemed so apparent to me that people get into difficulty when they choose to *live by their feelings*. For example, if a married man develops feelings for a female co-worker who is not his wife—and if he follows through on those feelings—he will wind up destroying his marriage. I had also observed that these sorts of scenarios were not isolated. They were becoming an increasingly common pattern in a world that has rejected absolute authority and counsels people to follow wherever their feelings may lead them. But such counsel does not line up with God’s counsel in Proverbs 14:12: “*There is a way that seems right to a man—but in the end, it leads to death.*” So it seemed obvious to me that *feelings* must be the culprit. I believed that *feelings* were simply not *trustworthy* and therefore should not be given much consideration. For me, the ideal person was one who didn’t express a lot of emotion. Sort of like the character on Star Trek played by Leonard Nimoy called “Spock.” [Slide 1]

That model seemed to make sense to me—except for one little problem. The same Bible that warns against living by *unchecked feelings* does not call us to “throw the baby out with the bath water.” Passages like John 13:17—“If you know these things, *happy* you are if you do them.” “Happy?” I thought. “What does *happiness* have to do with it? It’s your *duty* to obey. You’re not supposed to be happy about it—*just obedient!*” But then I began to be challenged in my thinking on this topic by the psalms. Talk about *emotions*! They are *all over* the psalms. Sometimes they are not very pretty. Sometimes they may even point to faulty thinking—like Psalm 42:5. But what you see in the psalms is that *emotions really do matter to God*. He created us with emotions. And while emotions can be hijacked by sinful thoughts and desires—they are ultimately meant to be used *constructively and for God’s glory*.

God used two studies to challenge my thinking on this. One was on the life of Jesus. If Jesus Christ is the perfect example of what it means to be truly human, I should be able to get a good idea of where emotions are supposed to fit in by looking at His life. Was I *ever* surprised! As I looked at Jesus’ life, I didn’t see some sort of emotionless, Spock-like character who came to do a job and simply get it done. I saw in Jesus the most complete and perfect display of emotions you will ever see in a human being. Anger at the exploitation of money-changers and religious leaders. Compassion toward hapless, helpless crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd. Humor in his teaching. I saw His profound grief at Lazarus’ funeral. But the greatest emotion of all in Jesus was His *joy*. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus endured the Cross because of the *joy* He saw at the Finish Line of Eternity! If Jesus is our Example, then I could not afford to look at emotions as just a *necessary evil*.

At the same time I was considering the life of Jesus, I bumped into something else. A book by one of the greatest theologians in American Church History—Jonathon Edwards.

It was entitled: Religious Affections. In it, Edwards made this observation: “**True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.**” The premise of his book is that emotions (or *affections* as he calls them) are one of the vital indicators of a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ. If that sounds a bit questionable, then consider what Jesus said in Matthew 6:21, “...*where your treasure is—there will be your heart also.*” In other words, the question is not whether or not to express emotion—but **for what** we express our emotions.

So what is our problem then? Is it *really* with our emotions? I don’t think so. The real problem is always deeper than the emotions. It has to do with what *controls* our emotions. Our thoughts and beliefs. Our desires and goals. These are the things that drive our emotions. These are what make our emotions either good or bad, productive or destructive, God-honoring or idolatrous. So I hope you can better understand why your emotional life matters to God. Because your emotions say a lot about *how* you think and *what* you live for.

We began to see that last week as we looked at Psalm 95. We saw that when your heart is captivated by the greatness and goodness of God—it can’t help but **move** your emotions to respond to Him in heartfelt worship. And what does that look like? The psalmist uses three emphases: First, worship is **rejoicing!** It is being so overwhelmed with the greatness of God that you can’t help but passionately celebrate with singing, shouting and the playing of all kinds of musical instruments. We also saw that genuine worship involves **revering**. It takes seriously the holiness of God! Not only His judgment of sin, but His amazing mercy and grace in bearing the penalty of that sin in the place of sinners like us.

Finally we saw that such *rejoicing* and *revering* must necessarily lead to **resolving**—resolving to not only to hear—but to trust and obey the Savior who has done so much for us. But before the psalmist can finish leading the worshippers in this worship psalm—something *extraordinary* happens. [Slide 3a] Look with me at verse 7b: “*Today if you hear His voice....*” Just as the psalmist appeals to the listener to obey God’s voice, God Himself interrupts with a warning in verses 8-10: [Slide 3b]

*8 do not **harden your hearts** as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, 9 where your fathers **tested and tried me, though they had seen** what I did. 10 For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, “They are a people whose **hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.**”*

God who alone knows men’s hearts sees something going on in this worship service that demands a warning. We are not told what he sees in the immediate context in which the psalmist composes this psalm. But whatever it is, God sees in the heart of these worshippers a tendency that will lead to the same problem that happened to their ancestors in the wilderness—and can happen in those who profess to follow Him today. What is it that He sees? He sees a mood (and the heart behind it) that will absolutely *ruin* worship. Before we look at that mood, let’s ask the Lord to prepare us for what He is about to show us from His Word [PRAY]

What is it that would upset God enough to interrupt a worship service? What is *so* serious in God’s eyes as to evoke the sort of warning you hear in verse 11? [Slide 4 a]

I. God warns against complaining (8-10)

Now I can I imagine what you are thinking? God is uptight about... **complaining**?! What is the *big deal* about *that*? After all, isn't complaining a constitutional right—included in the first amendment of the constitution under the “freedom of speech” clause?!

And boy do we Americans love to invoke *that* right. You see it all over. We're all part of it. Let me give you some things that we complain about. Listen carefully and think about how frivolous they really are and see if you can identify with any of them. These are the things that typically trigger anger, hostility, and sometimes even violence. Things like **traffic jams**. Or **slow-moving drivers**—*especially when they happen to be in front of you*. For some of you, that can be enough to cause you to lose your sanctification. How about **freeway cutters** who cut in front of you? Or people who talk too much. For others of you—it's lines. *Long lines, short lines, any lines*. Just having *one person* in front of is enough to trigger complaining. Why? **Because you want it your way—and now**. **Crying babies** trigger complaining. If you don't think there is a terribly frightening discontent over crying babies, then ask yourself why there is such an increase of child abuse...precipitated by crying babies...once held to the breast of a mother, now back-handed or violently shaken *or who knows what?!* Then there are **phone calls** at inconvenient times or misplaced keys or—would you believe this? *Massive trauma* caused by non-house broken puppies! I mean we really get stressed out by the *biggies*, don't we? For others, it only takes **cold food**. We not only *want* it—we want it the *temperature* we want it. Have I hit your trigger yet? Well how about someone **interrupting your conversation**? Or **noisy neighbors** or **being rushed** by your husband or **late airplanes** or **tight clothes** or **unsuccessful diets** or **squeaking doors** or **incompetent people** around you or **flat tires** when you're in a hurry? Some people constantly complain over the fact they have to *balance a checkbook*. Or maybe it's having to **do the dishes** after a meal. Or your **mother-in-law** or **weeds** or the **humid weather** or **high gas prices**. These are the things that if we think wrongly or want selfishly—will generate hostility in us and even cause tremendous conflict in marriage. We complain about all these things—and more! But if you step back for a moment and really think about it—our responses are really ridiculous.

Now, if you lived in Hiroshima and it was 1945, you might have a problem worthy of real concern. But just because you **lost out on a promotion** or a business deal, or just because your **child announced last week that she hates her room**, or just because the bank notified you this morning that you're **overdrawn**, I'm sure we can find a way to survive! We hear a lot today about *mid-life crisis*. Do you know that there are nations in the world where the majority have never had a mid-life crisis *because they don't even live that long*? There are millions of people who aren't bothered by such things because they live in an area where the average life span is only 37 years! Imagine how those men and women are spared the distressing reality of a fortieth birthday!! Some people complain about **grocery bills**. Over ten thousand people die of starvation every day and we're complaining about grocery bills? Millions more suffer from malnutrition. Others complain about **the high cost of rent**. Well maybe you'd rather be a street dweller in Calcutta. They don't pay rent. They're born, live and die on the pavement. All they

have to worry about is finding a rag they can put under their head when they sleep at night.

You see, while these kinds of horrors go on around the world in a sort of normal, accepted way, we throw tantrums because we got seated at a poorly located table in a fancy restaurant. Or we're frustrated because we can't lose ten pounds. Or we gripe about our monthly debts. You think *you've* got problems? Relative *to what*?

It is the natural mood of the mob to complain. Because it is our sinful tendency to focus on what we *don't have* rather than on what we *truly deserve*. And what aggravates this tendency is that we live in an idealistic, fantasy-oriented, consumptive culture that is continually fanning the flames of our natural discontent. So God breaks in from time to time to graciously warn us of this ever-present tendency and to help us to daily check our hearts. What does God have to say about our complaining? First of all... [Slide 4b]

A. *Complaining* is incompatible with worship

What is worship? It is acknowledging the **worth** of the One whom you profess to worship. It is reminding ourselves of what the psalmist states back in verse 3: “For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods....”

How can you truly worship God—the One whom you profess to be in control of everything—and then turn around and complain about how He is running His universe? And yet we do it. I do. Probably none of you ever do that! How can we declare that He is good and does all things for our good and His glory—and then turn around and give Him a vote of “no confidence?” Do you see how incompatible that is with worshipping God *in spirit and in truth*? Can you understand why God would want to interrupt such worship?

But it's not merely the irony of complaining even as we declare that God is great and God is good. That is just the *tip* of the ice berg of complaining. God sees something worse than that. You see, to God...[Slide 4c]

B. Complaining is an act of revolt against His rule (9)

Look again with me at verses 8-9:

*8 do not **harden your hearts** as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, 9 where your fathers **tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did...***

These verses are referring to a tragic event in Israel's past. In her history, Israel had some great times of rejoicing—like when God opened up the Red Sea for them [Slide 5] while almost simultaneously destroying her enemies [Slide 6]. You can read about this celebration in Exodus 15 and the Songs of Moses and Miriam. Israel had also enjoyed some times of

revering—like when God manifested His glorious presence in the Tabernacle [Slide 7] Yet in spite of all that—they complained again and again.

Notice two key words in the text: Meribah and Maasah. They refer to the same incident at Rephidim which is recorded in Exodus 17:7: [Slide 8]

And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Shortly after God miraculously brought them across the Red Sea, they experienced a serious water shortage in the Sinai desert. And so what was their response? Did they trust God? NO! They *bitterly* complained. Notice those two words again.

1. Meribah—lit. “quarreling.” It speaks of their grumbling and complaining against God in the wilderness. Then there’s the word...
2. Maasah—lit. “testing.” This speaks of testing or trying God’s patience.

Based on what God had already done for them in delivering them out of the bondage of Egypt, they had every reason to believe that He would take care of them. But they *did not* believe. In fact, this incident of unbelief became a pattern that characterized this generation for the rest of their tragic journey. You can read about their subsequent complaining in the book of Numbers.

Numbers 11—They complain about their menu. [Slide 9] God had graciously provided manna in the wilderness for them each morning. Later Moses would point out why God chose to provide their food in such an unusual way. [Slide 10]

*Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. ³ He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, **to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD** Deuteronomy 8:3-4*

Do you see God’s agenda? He is not just meeting their obvious physical needs. He does that. But He wants to do so in a way that they learn that their greatest need is to *depend on Him alone!* He is saying—you need

food. But there is something you need even more than food itself. You need to rely on and live by my counsel.

But rather than being thankful for their daily manna, they *complained*. I mean they really complained. [Slide 11]. Just listen to their whining in Numbers 11:

*⁴ The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, “If only we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt **at no cost**—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. ⁶ But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but **this manna!**”*

Talk about being blinded by your desires! They are so hung up about their restricted menu that they make Egypt sound like a **5 Star Restaurant** instead of a place of suffering, slavery, and death!! Here they are, privileged to stand at the door of their tents every morning and witness God’s covenant faithfulness to them. Here again just like in the Exodus from Egypt, God is harnessing the forces of nature to provide for people who had no means to provide for themselves. This provision was such a clear indication of God’s love that Jesus Christ would later take “Manna” as one of His names in John 6. He would one day declare that **He** is the Manna that has come down from Heaven. He is the only Bread that can satisfy the starving soul. The Israelites should have looked at the manna each morning and thought: “How could God love us enough to do yet another miracle for *us*?”

*Do you see what is happening? Do you what is behind their complaining that **so** displeases God? They are so bent on getting what they want that they reject and rebel against God’s gracious purposes for them!*

Application: The analogy for us is pretty obvious. How many times do we complain against God for what is going on in our lives. How many times are we so set on what we want that we blind ourselves to the very thing He knows we need! If instead of complaining, you were to take the time to look at what has happened in light of God’s revealed purposes and promises, you would slowly begin to see His gracious hand at work in your life!

Illustration: Losing my PDA and my laptop computer within 24 hours. Complaining barely describes my response. I nearly went “catatonic” (like Dr. Marvin in the comedy movie, “What About Bob?”). Later I realized that God was teaching me I was too dependent on my tools when my sustenance and power comes only from Him!

Why was despairing and complaining my first response? Because my heart was not lined up with God’s agenda. I mean I wasn’t even *curious* about what God might have been up to. It was my way or the highway—

and the highway obviously won! It is a humbling thing to realize how ready I was to oppose God's will because I was *so set on my own will!* But this text has yet more to say about our problem. Not only is complaining *incompatible with worship*, not only is it *an act of rebellion*, but complaining is also...[Slide 12a]

C. [Complaining is] a symptom of an even deeper problem (8, 10)

The psalmist is telling you and me that the heart of the problem is the *problem of the heart*. Some people are worried about the hardening of the arteries. But the psalmist in Psalm 95:8 warns about... [Slide 12b]

1. A *hardening* heart

What does the Bible mean when it talks about a hardened heart. It speaks of an attitude of stubbornness and self-will. It is a person's determination to *pursue their own way*.

Principle: Spiritually speaking, the most dangerous thing that could ever happen to your heart would be for it to get its own way—and that way not be God's way! The great missionary stateswoman, Amy Carmichael used to say: "***Be careful what you set your on—for it surely shall be yours!***"

The next time you want something and you find yourself in disappointment, starting to complain, just ask yourself this question: How much do I really want this? Could my craving for this in any way diminish my joy in Christ and His mercy and grace to me? If God were to grant my desire for this certain thing—would I be excited most excited for the thing itself—of the knowledge that His granting of this request is yet another token of His infinite love to me. Or to put it another way: Which am I tending to love more at this moment—the gift itself or the Giver!

When a "complainer" complains and complains and finally receives what He was complaining for—it is usually not an act of grace but an act of judgment (See the rest of Numbers 11). They complained about a meatless menu and God caused so much quail to fall from the sky that they could be stacked three feet deep and the width of a day's journey on foot!! The only thing that was merciful about God's granting of that request was that He didn't give them steak!! (Can you imagine big Angus steers falling from the sky!?)

Application: There is much application here. Two thoughts to chew on:

1. Could God be judging America by allowing us indulge our hearts in so much material prosperity?
2. Parents—what do you think happens when your kids complain and you give in to make them happy?

Transition: Do you know what happens to a hardening heart? It becomes a...

2. [Slide 12c] A *wandering* heart (mentioned in Psalm 95:10)

A wandering heart is a heart that is constantly exchanging the worship of the Creator for some aspect of the creation. While it may profess to believe in the One True God, it's affections and actions are wandering toward the current god of choice. It wanders during formal worship. That's why God lamented the worship of Israel ("Their lips are *near* but their hearts are *far!*") In fact, a wandering heart wanders during most of a person's waking hours. When it thinks it has what its pursuing—it's happy. But when it doesn't get it—it complains. And even when it obtains that desired object: that person, that job, that house, that status—it just finds something else to wander after. Because a wandering heart is a heart that is *never satisfied*.

Transition: So what is it that makes a heart harden and wander? The psalmist doesn't say. But the author of Hebrews, in commenting on Psalm 95 gives us this answer in Hebrews 4:2:

*For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, **because those who heard did not combine it with faith.*** A heart ultimately hardens and wanders because it is...[Slide 12d]

3. An *unbelieving* heart

The Israelites did not suffer from a lack of information. They had all the revelation they needed up to that point. They had all the promises of God necessary to enter and take control of the land of Canaan. They simply failed to internalize the promises of God. They ultimately believed what they could see and taste over a God who had never failed to deliver on His promises—and who stood ready to continue His promise-keeping. It's not how many times you go to church or how many sermons you hear or how many books you read that matters. Ultimately it is what you set your heart on. What you set your heart on is what you will live for—and ultimately you will find that it truly satisfies you or that it merely *deceived* you. "***Be careful what you set your on—for it surely shall be yours!***" Which brings us to the last statement in this text: [Slide 13a]

II. God declares His verdict on defiant complainers (11)

*So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall **never enter my rest.**"*[Slide 13b]

Question: *What exactly is this rest that is denied persisting "complainers?"*

For the Israelites in the wilderness: Their complaining took them around in circles for 40 years until one by one they died in the wilderness. They never found the rest of settling in the Promised land of Canaan because of their unbelief.

And that is where this psalm abruptly ends. What a strange and hopeless ending. That is remarkable because most of the psalms end in a triumphant note. So what is going on here? Jesus said concerning the psalms and all the OT for that matter: “*These are they which testify of me.*” Everything in the OT ultimately points to Him. The psalmist, by ending abruptly is sending a warning—but He is also waiting for an answer. Who can *change* the hardening, wandering, unbelieving heart? Who can free our emotions to express themselves to the One they were meant to be stirred by and for? Jesus!!! Jesus!!! Jesus!!!

2,000 years pass and the author of Hebrews finally finishes this psalm. It’s a NT postscript. It’s....[Slide 14]

III. *God’s answer* for the complaining heart (**Hebrews 3:7-4:16**).

The author of Hebrews says in 4:9 that “there remains a rest for the people of God.” But what is that rest? Some say this rest is Christ’s future kingdom. Ultimately that is true. But the rest that *culminates* in His future kingdom begins in a relationship with the King here and now. Listen to what King Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-29: [Slide 15]

²⁸ “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*”

There is *no rest* apart from Jesus. Augustine, one of the greatest leaders in the early church expressed this truth with great eloquence in his Confessions:

[Slide 16] “*Thou movest us to delight in praising thee; for Thou hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till thy find rest in thee.*”

To miss *this* rest is to miss the One who makes life worth living here and now and the One for whom to know is Eternal Life. Having this rest is not simply reciting a prayer. It is transferring your faith from yourself to the One who lived a sinless life and died in the place of deserving sinners like you and me. And those who truly receive His rest will continue to *pursue* their rest in Him until He comes again.

The author of Hebrews exhorts you and me to not only receive this rest—but He admonishes us “to not let go.” “To not drift away” from it. Is He saying we can possess it and then somehow lose it? No. He is saying that those who have this rest must *never* stop pursuing it! Why? Because until we are finally glorified, we will always struggle against wrong thinking and motives that pressure our hearts to harden, wander, and doubt His rest. But listen to how the writer of Hebrews concludes this warning section in Hebrew 4:12-16:

¹² *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* ¹³ *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

*(Scary thought isn't it. The "heart knower" knows **everything** about me! Makes you want to run and hide. But instead look at what he says next! Not run **from** Him but **to** Him!)*

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, ^a Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

He knows our struggles. He struggled mightily with all His Being against sin. He understands because He was tempted too. But for the joy set before Him—He endured it all so that you could have a way to the Father and One day share His joy. Run to Him and find rest for your soul!