

Why Count Your Blessings When You Can Complain?! (Part 1)

by Ron R. Ritchie

I don't know about you, but I tend to forget the benefits of the Lord, so from time to time I find myself in a season of complaining.

A complainer is one who feels pain, grief or discontent with people, things or circumstances. His world view is clouded because he is so busy complaining. A complainer thinks that if people would only come to him about their problems all would be well. If everybody looked to him as the center of the universe all problems would disappear. We complain because we think God is not doing his work properly, that if he would only trust us with his work everything would be solved--and in quicker time, too.

If you are one who likes to complain, these times and seasons are heaven for you because there are so many things to complain about. You can get a whole list together and sit down with someone who loves to listen to people who complain. That's heaven on earth, isn't it? You could begin with international and national problems, covering the spectrum from the nuclear holocaust that's coming, all the way to Reaganomics.

When you've finished complaining about those problems, then you can move right on to the most serious problem we are facing_which all of us have complained about, or at least have been tempted to complain about_and that is our Pacific Gas and Electric bills. Then we could go on to complain about gas prices, about our wives who are away on the PBC retreat, or our husbands who are not growing fast enough spiritually (if they would just listen to us we would get them in shape), or our children who are not making it in one respect or another. Complain, complain, complain!

I recently went through a "season of discontent." I was convinced that God was not doing very well, so I got up one morning, sat in my favorite chair, and started reading through the Psalms. It seems the Psalms have all the answers to my heart problems. When I read Psalm 103 I was rebuked, humbled and taught, all at once. Scripture has a way of quickly pointing out just how messed up we are and then pointing us in the right direction. I deliberately picked up the Bible, knowing that that would happen, but I didn't think it would happen so quickly. I really wanted to spend about four days in the first thirty--nine chapters of Job.

Psalm 103, written by King David, was such an encouragement! I came away from reading that Psalm with the feeling that I had been to a gold mine with a very small bucket. I can offer you a few nuggets from my digging, but I hope you will go back with a large truck and many workers to pull out of this Psalm the gold that is still left there.

This message, therefore, is dedicated to all who have found themselves complaining in the past, those who are presently complaining, and those who plan to complain in the future. The rest of you may leave now. No one leaving?! Apparently I am at home with my fellow--complainers_or, at least, men and women who acknowledge the temptation and the desire to complain. Remember, we said that we complain because we experience grief, pain or discontent over people, places and things; we complain because we do not believe God is really in charge and he is working out his plan of redemption among us.

David wrote this song to be sung by the congregation in the tabernacle. He wrote from a humble heart because of his awareness of who God is. As we see this Psalm develop over the next two weeks we will see that, in spite of all his problems with his own countrymen, with national politics and with his own sin, David is a man who knows who God is. He is sensitive; he is tender; he has a sense of the presence of God.

A complainer is one who feels pain, grief or discontent over people, places or circumstances

As we read his writings, David gives us a sense of awe. I feel that when David came into the presence of God he threw himself down before him because he understood himself in light of who God was. But David was often tempted to complain, especially about his enemies. He often prayed in these words, "Lord, I would appreciate it if you would just wipe my enemies off the face of the earth." We all feel that way at times. Hopefully, after studying this Psalm together, we will change my title from, " Why Count Your Blessings When you Can Complain?" to "Why Complain When You can Count Your Blessings?"

The Psalm breaks down into four sections:

first, the call to bless the Lord (verses 1 and 2) second, the reminder of the Lord's blessings (vs. 3-5) third, the reminder of the Lord's righteous deeds (vs. 6-7) fourth, the reminder of the Lord's nature (vs. 8-12)

1. The Call To Bless The Lord (verses 1 and 2)

Bless the Lord, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul; And forget none of his benefits;

David cries out to his mind, to his intellect, and to his will. He calls to himself as though he were made up of two persons, and he says, "My soul, we should bless the Lord, bless his holy name, and not forget any of his benefits."

David says this because he is well aware that we normally forget God's benefits. I am amazed at how frequently I am nervous about certain areas of my life. This becomes so obvious that my wife sees it--usually rather quickly--and she says to me, "Have you so quickly forgotten what God has done? Why do you act as though God isn't going to care for us?" We struggle with complaining, therefore, because we forget.

Then David lists for us five of God's benefits. (All five of these benefits which God does are listed in the present tense. In other words, our God, the great I AM is always capable and willing to do these things for his children.)

2. The Reminder Of The Lord's Personal Blessings (verses 3-5)

**Who pardons all your iniquities;
Who heals all your diseases;
Who redeems your life from the pit;
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;
Who satisfies your years with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.**

First, David says God provides a covering for all of our sins. God is available, willing and able to forgive us our sins and our iniquities; and not only that, but to relieve us of the guilt that accompanies them. For 1,500 years, a lamb was used by the Israelites as a symbol of the final Passover Lamb who would take away the sins of every man, woman and child, and never hold those sins against them again. Only the Holy One of Israel, now revealed in his Son Jesus Christ, could accomplish that. He is the God who said, "Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool." (Isaiah 1:18) The apostle John tells us, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John 1:9) All you have to do is to agree with God that your sin is, in fact, sin. Then the Deliverer, the Savior of the world, can deliver you from that sin, from the guilt you feel because of your sin, and from the power that sin has over you.

Second, God is the one "who heals us from all our diseases." Isaiah 53 says that because Jesus died on the cross for our sins, the chastisement of all of us was placed on him, and "by his stripes we are healed." We Christians know that when we came to Jesus, healing definitely occurred within our spirits. Our spirits, which were "dead in their trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1-10), are now cleansed and renewed and brought back to life. And we know too that when we came into a relationship with Jesus he filled our hearts with the Spirit

of God. He gave us his peace, his joy and his wholeness regardless of how the outward circumstances may appear. This is how we were healed emotionally.

And God is entirely capable of physically healing everyone in this room too if doing so would enhance his plan of redemption for this time and space. For example, John Landrith is suffering from terminal cancer, yet he is excited about what Jesus is teaching him through his ordeal. But, on the other hand, we heard last week that Francis Shaeffer has been healed of his cancer. Now we don't understand why God would heal one man spiritually and another man physically. But if doing so fits his plan of redemption--"Our life is not our own; we are bought with a price"--we know that God will accomplish healing because he is in charge of the affairs of men.

In John 9 we read that Jesus healed a blind beggar, yet there were many blind people whom he did not heal in those days. God wants us to trust him, to allow him the freedom to heal whoever he wants to heal, because in the end he will heal all of us physically. In the new heaven and the new earth there will be no more tears, no more sorrow, no more pain, no more death. (Revelation 21) We will be totally healed. Our God pardons all our sins and heals all our diseases.

Then third, David says that God redeems us from the pit. Here God is pictured as a kinsman who redeems a relative from a life of slavery which that relative entered because of debt. What a beautiful picture of our Lord, who purchased us out of the slave market of sin! God can redeem us from a life of decay, hopelessness and helplessness. He can bring us back to spiritual life again.

A common expression these days is, "I'm in the pits." Someone even wrote a book entitled, "If life is a bowl of cherries, why am I always in the pits?" This is what David is talking about. At one time during Corrie Ten Boom's imprisonment in a concentration camp which was a den of misery, sickness and death, her sister Becky said to her, "This is such a pit, Corrie, such a pit of evil." But Corrie replied, "There is no pit so deep that Jesus isn't deeper. He is able to lift us out of the pit."

David goes on to say that this God who pardons our iniquities, who heals all our diseases, who redeems us from the pit is the one who, fourth, "crowns us with lovingkindness and compassion." As king of Israel, David wore a crown of dignity and honor. After we establish a relationship with the Holy One of Israel, the great I AM, he crowns us with invisible crowns of kindness and compassion. We usually think that God will punish us every time we make a mistake, but it does not say that here. God knows that we are in a process of maturing. He continually crowns us with these gifts of compassion and kindness which affect our physical, emotional and spiritual lives.

David continues that not only does God pardon us, heal us, redeem us and crown us, but, fifth, he "satisfies our years with good things so that our youth is renewed like the eagle." This reminded me right away of that passage in Isaiah 40:

**He gives strength to the weary,
And to him who lacks might he increases power.
Though youths grow weary and tired,
And vigorous young men stumble badly, Yet those who wait for the Lord Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary.**

Have you ever watched children playing? They are really oblivious to what is going on in the world. They get so excited about such things as mud puddles, worms, flowers, and a million other things which we adults don't even notice. They have so much energy that you get tired just watching them play. Well, God says that that is how he will make us too, so that "our youth will be renewed like the eagle."

The eagle is a picture of vigor, beauty and freedom. Somebody told me that they live over a hundred years. They shed their feathers and grow new ones so that they look like young eagles again. I could not help but think that God, in a sense, does something like that to the older men among us. (I am never sure whether I am one of the younger men or one of the older men. I think I'm in between.) Anyway, I'm amazed at how God

has taken some of these old eagles here at PBC and given them the energy of their youth. Bob Roe, for instance. What an eagle he is! His body may deceive you, but inside he's like a kid with a new Bible. He is forever racing around teaching the Scripture; he is always caring for people. He says he doesn't feel well most of the time, but I just can't keep up with him. Take Bob Smith. He's so excited about his new study on Melchizedek. He's going to teach it in Oregon and then in Colorado. Then he's off to Hong Kong or India. Charlie Luce looks like a young eaglet running around here. And how about Ray Stedman. Last week he shared some things about his ministry and what God was doing with him. Steve Zeisler looked him in the eye and said, " Ray, I can't keep up with you. " We are all astounded at Ray's youthful spirit which is daily being supplied to him by the Holy Spirit within him. So don't worry about getting old. I feel twenty-three myself. God has pardoned me, healed me, crowned me and taken me out of the pit so that I'm free to fly like an eagle.

David now goes on to remind himself of some of the Lord's righteous deeds.

3. The Reminder Of The Lord's Righteous Deeds (verses 6-7):

The Lord performs righteous deeds, And judgments for all who are oppressed. He made known his way to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel.

David talks about four things in these verses. First, the God we serve is righteous; his very nature is righteous and he continuously does righteous deeds. In the Book of Judges (Judges 5), Deborah describes God in these words, " Lord, you are a righteous God and you have dealt righteously with your people." She was singing God's praises after he had destroyed the 900 iron chariots of Jabin, the king of Canaan, and Sisera, his commander--in--chief, who had come to do battle against the Israelites. The Canaanites forced the Israelites, who had no weapons except Jehovah, to go up to Mt. Tabor. But God told his people to rest there and he would take care of them. He caused a violent rainstorm in the mountains, the flood waters rushed down the dry creek beds and flooded the iron chariots, killing all the Canaanites. Sisera escaped, hid in a tent and fell asleep. While he slept, Jael, the wife of Heber, drove a tent peg through his head. Deborah praises Jehovah's righteous acts towards his people.

Second, David says that God initiates "judgments for all who are oppressed." Israel has had a history of being oppressed from the days of the Egyptian captivity. Today she is oppressed by the nations all around her and by many nations of the earth. The church has been oppressed since the days of Jesus. The church in Russia today is oppressed, so is the church in Africa, in Columbia and other South American countries. In the last two years in Guatemala alone, sixteen godly missionaries have been assassinated. We see oppression on every side, but God promises that one day he will deal with this oppression and vindicate his people.

Psalm 9 makes these promises to the oppressed. Vs. 7:

**The Lord abides forever;
He has established his throne for judgment,
And he will judge the world in righteousness;
He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity. The Lord also will be a stronghold
for the oppressed,
A stronghold in times of trouble,**

**The Lord abides forever; He has established his throne for judgment,
And he will judge the world in righteousness;
He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity.
The Lord also will be a stronghold for the oppressed,
A stronghold in times of trouble,
And those who know thy name will put their trust in thee;
For Thou, O Lord, hast not forsaken those who seek Thee.**

The third righteous deed which David mentions is that God "made known his way to Moses." God first made himself known to Moses in the burning bush incident when he identified himself a "I AM who I AM." Later God met, spoke to, and gave his laws to Moses on Mt. Sinai. David says that God's ways are quite evident.

" So great is his lovingkindness toward those who fear him"

In our day, Jesus has certainly made himself known to us too. He teaches us by his Holy Spirit, by the New Testament, and by his faithful brothers and sisters. Jesus is among us, working with us to bless us with his benefits.

Fourth, David reminds himself and his congregation that Yahweh made his acts clear to the sons of Israel. For instance: the pillar of smoke by day, the fire by night, the water out of the rock, the manna (angel bread) and the meat were all provided by the gracious and loving hand of God, their God, the one and only true and living God, the ever-present I AM.

And we are just as blessed, for Jesus, the Son of God, made his way known to the apostles. We, in turn, know his way through the Spirit and his Word in every age until Jesus comes again.

David now reminds Israel of the Lord's character.

A Reminder of The Lord's Character (vs. 8-12):

**The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.
He will not always strive with us;
Nor will he keep his anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is his lovingkindness toward those who fear him,
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has he removed our transgressions from us.**

David says, "Our God is not like those foreign gods who bring fear and tyranny among us, who hate us and intimidate us. Our God is loving and gracious; he is compassionate toward us." Notice that those verbs are all in the present tense. Our God is always like this.

Nehemiah, the great post-exilic prophet (536 B.C.), depended on the same compassionate God when he prayed to him in the midst of his disobedient people some 850 years later. Nehemiah 1 :7-11 :

"We have acted very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances which thou didst command thy servant Moses. Remember the word which thou didst command thy servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your dispersed be under the farthest skies, I will gather thence and bring them to the place which I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' They are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power and by thy strong hand. O Lord, let thy ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants who delight to fear thy name; and give success to thy servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

This same love and compassion was shown to us when God sent us his Son Jesus to die for our sins. A clear detail of that love was recorded by Paul in Ephesians 2:4-7:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4-7)

David says that that God who walks among us is "slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." God is not angry with an unrighteous anger, the kind of anger that breaks out like a flash of lightning. No, he is slow

to anger because he wants us to come to know him. God was slow to anger toward Pharaoh; he was slow to anger in Noah's day; he was slow to anger toward Sodom and Gomorrah; he was slow to anger to the Israelites during the wilderness journey; he was slow to anger during the days of the Judges; he was slow to anger in David's day. But God does have a righteous anger, and one day his righteous justice must be served.

Despite all these wonderful examples of how slow God is to anger, however, David tells the Israelites to not push God too far: "God will not always strive with us, nor will he keep his anger forever." Not long after this Psalm was written, civil war broke out in Israel and the twelve tribes split up. There followed the Assyrian captivity, then the Babylonian captivity; then came the years of silence all the way through to John the Baptist.

I am always amazed at how many people continue sinning because they foolishly think that God will never bring them to justice. They are so arrogant about their sin. They foolishly think that because God is a God of love he can do nothing but love them. But that is to totally misunderstand who God is. A God of love he certainly is, but he is also a God of righteousness and justice.

Concluding this section, David looks back on all that God has done for him and says, "Bless the Lord O my soul and forget none of his benefits. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his lovingkindness toward those who fear him."

There is a little catch right there. God deals with men and women who have come into a relationship with him. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ." (Romans 8:1) Aren't you glad that God has not dealt with us according to our sins? Genesis 1 says that "God spoke" and the world came into being. God could destroy us with the mere sound of his voice because we have sinned against him. Everyone in the world deserves to be in hell right now, but God in his love through Christ is saving people from hell because he loves us. I just do not understand this kind of love. We who were his enemies are now his sons and daughters. That is an amazing benefit from God for which we should bless him.

We chase after our sins because we do not believe that God has truly forgiven us

Finally, David says that God forgives us: God takes away our sins "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." David uses this figure of speech to describe just how far God has removed our transgressions. If you begin to walk to the east, when will you arrive there? Never! Is there a place called "east" where you can hide when you have arrived there? No, we never get there because east is always ahead of us. Well, that is how far God has said he will remove our sins from us.

But then you know what we do: we chase after our sins because we do not believe that God has truly forgiven us. We want to wrestle our sins back from God's forgiving hands, we want to play all the old tapes of our sins again because we still feel guilty about what God has already forgiven. I beg you, when Jesus comes into your life and takes your sins away, let them go; keep your hands off. Allow God to take your sins as far to the east, as far to the west as he wants; then thank him that he has done so.

What is the cure for a complaining spirit? How can we be set free from discontentment, from not trusting the Lord to be at work in our lives, in this community, and in the World? David tells us that the cure is to,

establish a personal relationship with our loving and gracious God;

talk to our soul to remind ourselves to not forget all of God's benefits;

remind ourselves of the Lord's blessings, physically, emotionally, and spiritually in our lives;

remind ourselves of the Lord's righteous deeds toward us;

remind ourselves of the Lord's loving and gracious nature and how we stand holy and blameless before the Father because of his Son.

David expresses his thanks to God for all of his mercies; we should express our thanks to the Father, in the name of his Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, for all of his mercies.

Psalm 103:1-12
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