

## "How to Gripe like a Christian" Psalm 13

### Introduction

- To begin this morning, I want to show a clip from a movie that came out a few years ago. As it plays, ask yourself if you've ever felt this way before. Roll the film.<sup>1</sup>
- What do you think? Ever felt this way before? That God is distant? That he never answers? Have you ever found yourself complaining to him? Other than crossing the line with the sarcastic O Mighty Smiter bit do you realize that this tirade, albeit over the top, is thoroughly biblical? The emotion, the intensity, the frustration, the anguish. All thoroughly biblical and appropriate. Did you know it is appropriate to complain and gripe to God?
- Let me take it one step further. Not only is it biblical to complain, and you must stick with me so that I can explain what I mean when I say that, but I believe that the complaint is often a missing component of our personal and corporate worship.

### Proposition

- **God wants us to make our complaints part of our worship**
- This morning, we begin a short series through the Psalms called *The Songs of Life*. Today we are going to look at how to **gripe** like a Christian. Next week we'll take a look at how to **doubt** like a Christian. The following week we'll look at how to take **revenge** like a Christian. Week four we'll examine how to **regret** like a Christian. And lastly, we'll look at how to **worship** like a Christian.
- One of the great blessings of God's Word, and especially the Psalms, is that they sing with emotions. In a simplistic way, if Paul's letters in the New Testament are the logic and mind of God teaching us to think and behave like Christians; then the Psalms teach us how to emote in a godly way. Whether you are happy or sad, elated or depressed, angry or bitter—or any emotion in between—there is a Psalm to match. They are the songs of life.
- I have a strong conviction that our emotions are a gift from God. To be unfeeling, unemotional is inhuman. The problems we have are not due to our emotions. The problem is sin. Sin not only has corrupted the mind as it rebels against God. And our will as we defy God with our actions. Sin has betrayed our hearts and corrupted our emotions. The front we put up on the outside can be clean and shiny but on the inside our emotions can be a mess—dominated by sin and out of control. Because of our fallenness, with any given emotion, there is the potential for sin to master that emotion. So instead of a righteous anger that cries out to God at the injustice of a

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Almighty, Universal Studios, 2003, Chapter 5, 21:04-23:26. Approximately 2 minute 20 seconds in length.



- That brings us to the Psalms themselves. How many psalms are there? One hundred and fifty, right? Did you know that roughly one-third of the psalms are lament psalms? Numerically, there are more complaint psalms, if I can call them that, than any other kind of psalm. There are more complaint psalms than psalms of praise, than psalms of thanksgiving, than psalms of penitence. Life is difficult. Things don't go as planned. Big questions often go unanswered. And God in his infinite wisdom knows this and has provided a forum for his followers to express themselves—the lament. God has given us the lament to teach us to gripe in a way that glorifies Him. How else do you explain such a preponderance of biblically sanctioned complaints? Listen to how [Walter Moberly](#) put it. The name's inconsequential but I like what he said. "Such predominance of laments at the very heart of Israel's prayers means that the problems that give rise to lament are not something marginal or unusual but rather are central to the life of faith. Moreover they show that the experience of anguish and puzzlement in the life of faith is not a sign of deficient faith, something to be outgrown or put behind one, but rather is intrinsic to the very nature of faith. Instead of the problems of the life of faith being put on one side, as though worship should really be just a matter of praise and thanksgiving, these problems are made central to the very act of prayer and worship."<sup>2</sup>
- Some of you here have mistakenly segmented life's problems and the Christian life. Your problems here and God here and the two never meet. That's wrong. Others of you somehow have come to believe that life's problems keep you from living an obedient Christian life and from serving. I can't tell you how many times I've heard this. "Oh, Pastor, when things just get easier then I'll start serving and developing my ministry." Wrong. What if your problems and trials never go away? Or some of you believe that somehow God must be displeased with you because of the way things have turned out—as if God is the great boogie man in the sky out to get you. Wrong again. Your problems, my problems, those things in our lives, in our work, in our families, in this church that cause us to lament—to complain, are intrinsic to the very nature of faith. And if we fail to see them as such we waste much of life. The lament psalms, the complaint psalms contain the strategy for mastering a crisis.<sup>3</sup> No experience is wasted for the follower of God. Laments teach us that the circumstances of life, whatever they are, are opportunities for worship. And we as American Christians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not good at this form of complaining. Our view of what the Christian life should be like is skewed. It's no wonder then that some Christians are driven to depression or superficiality. That others abandon the faith altogether as lacking in integrity and not corresponding to reality because we make no room for the lament.<sup>4</sup>
- Let's take a moment now to learn how to complain biblically. Turn in your bibles to Psalm 13. As you turn there, let me make a few comments about lament psalms because, generally speaking, they all have roughly the same formal components. If you are taking notes, you might want to write these five things down. Five components of a lament.

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<sup>2</sup> NIDOT, vol. 4, p. 879.

<sup>3</sup> DBI, p. 484.

<sup>4</sup> NIDOT, vol. 4, p. 884.

- Most lament psalms begin with an **address to God and a cry for help**. That's the **first component**. Psalm 13 is no different. Look at verse 1. It begins very simply, *O Lord*. When you find you have something to complain about the first place you must go is God. Not to your neighbor. Not to your husband or your wife. Not to your friend. Not to your pastor. But God. "O Lord, I can't believe this is happening." "O Lord what am I going to do?" "O Lord, why did you allow this?" "O Lord, why did they do this to me?" In order for a gripe to be sanctified it must begin with God. Dump your gripe on him not on other people. If you are taking your complaint to others or find yourself murmuring under your breath about what then you've crossed the line into sin.
- The **second component** of a biblical complaint is a **detailed description of the reason for the complaint**. This is the protest. This is cause of the gripe. Just being human makes us good at this. However, most of our complaints are actually inconveniences. For instance, the following are actual complaints from comment cards given to the park staff at the 428,169-acre Bridger Wilderness Area part of the Wind River Range in Wyoming.
  - Trails need to be wider so people can walk while holding hands.
  - Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill.
  - Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the areas of these pests.
  - Please pave the trails so they can be snow-plowed during the winter.
  - Chair lifts need to be in some places so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them.
  - The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals. A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can get reimbursed?
  - Reflectors need to be placed on trees every 50 feet so people can hike at night with flashlights.
  - Escalators would help on steep uphill sections.
  - A McDonald's would be nice at the trailhead.
  - The places where trails do not exist are not well marked.
  - Too many rocks in the mountains.
- In the case of Psalm 13, David really has something to complain about. His gripe is against God himself. In other psalms the cause is circumstantial but here it's God. His gripe is that God has turned his back on him. Have you ever felt like that? That God has turned his back on you? Have you ever felt utterly abandoned by God? Listen to how David does it. He gives four specific complaints as seen by the fourfold repetition of the phrase *How long*. *How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?* David feels abandoned. Numb. Spiritually drained on the inside. Despairing because God has turned his back on him. He is alone—alienated. And suffering in his loneliness only aggravates [his] anguish.”<sup>5</sup> And he complains. He

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<sup>5</sup> VanGemeren.

gripes. He laments the circumstances of his life. This is the Jim Carey tirade right here. And you know what? God is never presented as being annoyed with our complaining questions of him. Your complaint will be heard. Some of you here may have pent up complaints that you haven't taken to God either because you're angry with him or you didn't know you could complain about those things to him. They might even be things from way back in your past. It may be twenty years ago but those feelings are still fresh, still raw because you've never properly lamented. What are you waiting for? If David can go to God and gripe and if his gripe can be about God himself why can't you take your complaint to him? Go ahead. Cry out to him about what's happening in your life or about what has happened. Gripe about what you see in the world. Gripe about how others are treating you. Gripe about what's heavy on your heart. Complain. Jump up and down. Shout. Get it out. Try to wear him out with your complaints. *Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary.*<sup>6</sup> He will listen. He will hear.

- The **third component** of a biblical complaint is rather obvious. Once the complaint has been detailed often times what follows is a **request for God to hear and deliver**. Make sure when you go to God with your complaint that you don't just rant and rave and then stop. Complain then petition God specifically with what you would like to see happen. Look at what David does in verses 3 and 4. In light of God turning his back on him he requests three things. Three things that if granted would reverse his circumstances and the reason for his complaint. He asks for God to look on him when God has hidden his face. He asks God to answer him when God has forgotten him. He asks God to give light to his eyes when his thoughts and sorrows have dimmed them. *Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; 4 my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.* Normally we're pretty good listing the things we want from God especially in times of distress. But normally we pray without the lament, without the complaint. And what I've found is that without the complaint our prayers to God remain general and non-specific. We normally just rush into his presence and ask ask without first detailing our complaints and then formulating specific requests in light of those gripes. Be specific in your prayers.
- What amazed me every time I read one of the lament psalms is how they end. The fourth and fifth components really are the things that teach us how to gripe like Christians instead of just murmuring and grumbling. Biblical laments normally end with **component four—a confession of trust in God** and **component five—a vow of praise**. Verse five contains the confession of trust. *But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.* And verse six contains the vow of praise. *I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.* Remember how I said earlier that I believe **God wants us to make our complaints part of our worship**. These last two components are how I know so. Somehow in the laments, there is always a change in mood. The complaint gives way to confident trust and praise. In spite of his circumstances, David confesses his trust because he knows God's character. He trusts

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 40:28.

in God's unfailing loyal love. And if nothing else makes sense, that's good enough for him. What is so interesting is that there is no evidence in this psalm, as is often the case, that David's circumstances have changed. God is still silent. "His protest against God has not been dropped."<sup>7</sup> And this is the key. This is, I believe, the chief purpose of the lament. When we learn to complain this way God brings us to a point where we can rejoice and sing and trust in spite of the continuing pain of our circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Underneath the most painful experiences of your life, under those things that cause you to complain to God are the bedrock of God's goodness and his unfailing love for you. Things may not get better. But even if that is the case you can worship because you have a hope. As Christians, we do not complain and gripe and lament like those who have no hope. *Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.*<sup>9</sup> Are you rejoicing in the midst of your complaint? Are you trusting in God's goodness and his unfailing love?

## Conclusion

- In his book *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café*, Leonard Sweet tells the story of the making of a film by two Londoners. In 1971 they began to film street people. The film captured the daily rituals of the homeless—their trials and joys. Some were drunk, others mentally disturbed. Some were articulate and others unintelligible. One of England's leading composers, Gavin Bryars, agreed to help with the audio aspects of the film. During his work, he became aware of a constant undercurrent of sound that appeared whenever one certain homeless man was filmed. At first, the sound seemed like muttered gibberish. But after removing the background noise, Bryars discovered the old man was singing.
- Bryars learned that this beggar did not drink or socialize with others. The old man was alone, filthy, homeless, but he also had a sunny demeanor. What distinguished him from the others was his quiet singing. He would for hours sing the same thing over and over. The man's weak voice was untrained, but it never wavered from pitch. He repeated the simple phrases of the song over and over and over.
- One day at the office the composer looped together the first 13 bars of the homeless man's song, preparing to add orchestration to the piece. He left the loop running while he went downstairs for a cup of coffee. When he returned, he found his fellow workers listening in silence, and a few were even weeping. The old man's quiet, trembling voice had leaked from the recording room and transformed the office floor. Here is what he sang:
  - Jesus' blood never failed me yet  
Never failed me yet  
Jesus' blood never failed me yet

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<sup>7</sup> Davidson, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 62:5

There's one thing I know  
For he loves me so.<sup>10</sup>

- You may in reality have a lot to complain about. But **God invites us to make our complaints part of our worship.** Let's pray.

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<sup>10</sup> Leonard Sweet, [A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café](#) (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), pp. 161-163.