

## Fierce Passions Discompose the Mind

*John Newton (1725–1807)*

Fierce passions discompose the mind,  
As tempests vex the sea;  
But calm content and peace we find,  
When, Lord, we turn to thee.

In vain by reason and by rule,  
We try to bend the will;  
For none but in the Savior's school  
Can learn the heavenly skill.

Since at his feet my soul has sat,  
His gracious words to hear,  
contented with my present state,  
I cast on him my care.

'Tis he appoints my daily lot,  
And will do all things well;  
Soon shall I leave this wretched spot,  
And rise with him to dwell.

In life his grace shall strength supply,  
Proportioned to my day;  
In death I still shall find him nigh,  
To bear my soul away.

Thus I, who once my wretched days  
In vain repinings spent;  
Taught in my Savior's school of grace,  
Have learned to be content.

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### On Complaining

*Kevin T. Bauder*

Complaining, along with gossiping, blaming, and criticizing, is one of the great human pastimes. Until we have been trained otherwise, we all love to complain. A disposition to complain is hardwired into us, and we slip into it without even considering what we are doing.

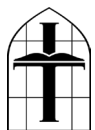
The problem is that complaining, generally speaking, is considered a vice. It is the very opposite of the virtue of gratitude. Even among non-Christians, the best figures try to foster gratitude and to stultify the spirit of complaining. We who are Christians recognize that habitual complaining is contrary to our sanctification. We do our best to help each other grow out of it. Plenty of biblical texts view complaining in this negative light (e.g., Jude 16).

This view of complaining, however, is a bit too simplistic. I suggest that under certain circumstances and done in certain ways complaining is fully compatible with our sanctification. In fact, it may be a sign of our determination not to reconcile ourselves to the conditions of a fallen world.

One acceptable form of complaining is the appeal made to God out of distress, often when one has been wronged. An example can be found in Hannah (1 Sam 1). She was deeply grieved, and she wept (7), partly because “the Lord had shut up her womb” (5), and partly because “her adversary provoked her sore” with the specific purpose of causing her grief (6). So poignant was Hannah’s sorrow that even her husband lost patience with her (8). Left with no other listening ear, Hannah took her bitterness to God (9–11). Even then the high priest Eli, who lacked the moral courage to correct his sons, felt called upon to rebuke this broken woman (12–14). In her reply she told him that she was speaking to the Lord out of the “abundance of her complaint” (16).

What Hannah was doing was taking her pain to God. She was suffering, genuinely and deeply, and her suffering robbed the joy from her life. Rather than trying to dismiss her bitterness or directing it toward other people, Hannah complained to God, who heard and answered her.

Hannah provides one example of godly complaining. Psalm 55 provides another, and it introduces a new element. When David was betrayed by a close



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friend, he took his complaint to God. Indeed, he recorded his complaint in his psalm. Verse 2 specifically identifies the psalm as a complaint. Even though Psalm 55 is a complaint to God, it was also written for other people to read and understand. Even if David was not complaining *to* other people, he was certainly complaining *for* them.

Asaph does a similar thing in Psalm 77. He was troubled in soul, overwhelmed, fearful that the Lord might cast off forever (7). Like David, he complained to the Lord (3). Like David, he recorded his complaint as a psalm to be studied by God's people. If he was not complaining *to* them, he was at least complaining *for* them.

Biblical complaining is taken to another level in the anonymous Psalm 102. The heading of the psalm (which is part of the inspired text) registers it as a "prayer of the afflicted, when he is overwhelmed, and poureth out his complaint before the Lord." Certainly this psalm was written by a real person passing through real anguish of soul, but the personal element is attenuated. Instead, the psalm is written as a formalized complaint, a kind of prefabricated grievance that any godly person can pray when afflicted and overwhelmed.

These examples help us to draw a distinction. Often, we understand complaining simply as synonymous with grumbling or griping—the kind of complaining in which the children of Israel constantly indulged during the exodus. If we take the foregoing passages seriously, however, then griping is only one species of complaining. It is the sinful kind of complaining. But another kind of complaining is not sinful. In fact, it may well be integral to the life of faith.

How do we identify righteous complaining? I posit that the complaint (1) must be about a real wrong, (2) must be made to a person who is justified in hearing it, (3) must be made to someone who either could and should do something about it, or (4) must be made about someone who must be held accountable. This is the sense in which we intend the word when we say that someone has entered a complaint in a court of law or filed a complaint through the union steward. Such a complaint is either an indictment of wrongs or a petition for redress of grievances.

Understood in this way, the Bible is full of righteous complaints. Nathan complained to David, "Thou art the man" (2 Sam 12:7). The psalmist complained of Babylon, "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones" (Ps 137:9). Habakkuk complained against Judah, "The law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth" (Hab 1:4). Jesus complained against the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites. Paul complained to Festus, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged: to the Jews have I done no wrong, as thou very well knowest"

(Acts 25:10). Every one of these complaints was justified. Every one of these complaints was godly.

By all means, let us repudiate a complaining, grumbling, griping, fault-finding spirit. But let us also remember that there is a different kind of complaining, a kind of complaining that has been practiced even among the saints. Perhaps if we would learn to do well the kind of complaining that we should do, then we would do less of the kind of complaining that we should not..



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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