

Grumble or Grow: Making the Right Choice

Psalm 105:1-6
Philippians 1:21-30

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Faith Community

Benjamin Zander is the conductor of The Boston Philharmonic Orchestra. He's also a published author and in high demand as a captivating public speaker. He tells of one of his teachers who said to his students,

"I'm so sorry for you; your lives have been so easy. You can't play great music unless your heart's been broken."¹

You heard me say a few weeks ago that more often than not, God cannot use a person unless and until that person has been broken, and Scripture along with secular history is filled with examples.

Here's the next step: it isn't enough to simply have a broken heart. The real important thing is what you do with your brokenness, how you respond.

Consider the Children of Israel, first while they were in slavery and then once freedom had been granted them.

The book of Exodus puts it this way:

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service....in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Exodus 1:13-14, NRSV)

As the story goes, the people are miraculously rescued and dramatically led out from slavery and started their journey to the Promised Land. To this day I get all worked up when I see the Ten Commandments movie from back in the 1950s.

In today's passage they're one month into their journey. They'd been eyewitnesses to the parting of the Red Sea and were fresh from an encampment that had twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. A few days later a bitter spirit reappears.

If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food

¹ Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life (New York, Penguin Books, 2000) p. 31.

we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” (Ex. 16:3)

The people had cried out for deliverance, but once they'd been delivered kept right on crying out. This wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last.

Actually, in that one sentence we find three dead ends in how to handle brokenness:

Complain
Compare
Blame

They put their selective memory in gear (pots of meat and all the food they wanted) and in the process took aim at the very ones who led them out from slavery in the first place.

Friends, here's one of my take-homes for today:

In a culture of complaint, everyone pays a price. The Children of Israel ended up spending forty years in the wilderness, and only two of them made it to the Promised Land.

In today's part of the story the people's complaints are heard and God responds with more miraculous actions, providing them with food for their journey, but that wouldn't be the last of the griping.

It's easy to stand here and fault with the complainers, but put any of us in a similar situation, and we may very well react in the same way. So it takes a certain amount of discipline to do otherwise.

Psalms 105 takes this very event and builds on it to offer a strategy, not just for survival but more importantly for hope.

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered... (Psalm 105:1-5)

Give thanks
Call

Make known
Sing
Glory
Seek
Remember

These are all volitional things. Before they're feelings they're decisions, choices, matters of the will, they're all part of a disciplined lifestyle.

Take just one of those words: remember. What do you choose to remember in your life? What significance do you give each memory, and how do you build on it?

Last Sunday Daphne led a small group of us on a trip to the Holocaust Museum on Orchard Lake Road. I challenge you to go there if you haven't yet. There are so many things to learn, even insights as to human nature. In looking back on that day I thought of a book I'd read awhile ago by Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist who endured years in Nazi death camps. He tells his story and shares insights that can be life changing. Listen to this:

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."²

Not that it's easy, mind you. It's a discipline. It's also thoroughly biblical.

A related passage that stands out to me is found in the New Testament book of Philippians. Keep in mind that Paul had endured hard times in Philippi and was writing this from a jail cell. If anyone had a right to be bitter, you'd think it would've been Paul.

Instead, the book of Philippians is sometimes called God's love letter to the church. It's filled with affirmations, healthy challenges, and great hope. Here's one of the headlines:

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. (Philippians 1:27)

² Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (New York, Washington Square Press, 1984), p. 86.

How does that speak to you?

If my first take-home was, “in a culture of complaint everyone pays a price,” here’s my second: you may not be able to control what happens to you, but you always have a say as to how you respond.

Will you grumble or will you grow? Will you wander in your own wilderness or will you enter the Promised Land of healing and restoration? It’s hard work, friends. It could be the most difficult thing you’ll ever do. It could also save your life.