

It did not take very long for the Promised Land honeymoon to be over for Moses. Within 72 hours of setting out from Mount Sinai the people “complained bitterly,” crying “If only we had meat for food.”<sup>1</sup> They blamed Moses for bringing them out of Egypt, where at least they had fish, melons, and onions to eat. Here in the desert, they had none of these things— only the monotonous manna. Understandably, Moses was feeling overwhelmed, and he needed some help.

God heard his plea and told him to select 70 elders, experienced leaders from among the tribes, to give them a share of the spirit of Moses. By all intents and purposes, this had to be a most humbling experience. While Moses himself received help, too many others are afraid to ask for help, seeing it as a sign of weakness. These 70 elders shared in the burdens of the office, as well as the joy of leading the people to the promised land.

We are told that two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, and somehow managed to remain in the camp and the spirit came to rest upon them as well.<sup>2</sup> Not only did the men not go out to the tent of meeting (Tabernacle) as directed, they began to prophesy in the camp, raising more than a few eyebrows. Who were these men and what gave them the right to speak in this manner?

Not surprisingly, Joshua – Moses’ aide from his youth—responded quite negatively. He asks Moses to stop them. Moses replies, “Are you jealous for my sake?” There is a subtle difference between jealousy and envy, which I addressed last week. Joshua had a privileged place with Moses, and jealously guarded it. He was either threatened by them or did not want the two men to acquire a leadership position. So, he complained.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Numbers 10:33, 11:4.

<sup>2</sup> Whether the number of elders chosen was 70 or 72 is a matter of dispute among scholars. Were Eldad and Medad among the original 70, or were they added? Rabbinic tradition itself is divided on this point.

Our English word complain derives from the Latin *plangere* meaning “to strike or beat” or “to lament.” It connotes a strong “pounding” of one’s breast in lament. In Italian a similar word means to cry, *piangere*. It is much more than noting of the burned edges of the brownies!

When we are exasperated, we may need to vent to others, to share our frustration. This is certainly not always sinful to do. But complaining quickly devolves into a nasty spirit of criticism, back-stabbing, gossip and detraction. Complaints rarely stay at the level of complaints; they metastasize into something more dangerous, robbing us of peace.

In the Old Testament, there is little question that Job complained; he made known his frustration for the misfortune he experienced, believing that he was a righteous man. In fact, many of the psalms in the Bible contain laments—people pouring out their troubles to the Lord. Psalm 77 begins: “I cry aloud to God, cry aloud to God that he may hear me.” The big difference is that the complaint is made to God; He can handle it.

Pour out your troubles to God; do not lay it on the backs of everyone else. Job was crying out for clarity and help, you might even say that his was a “holy complaining,” if you will. In his Angelus greeting at the end of last month, the Holy Father addressed this issue:

“Let us ask in prayer for the grace not to waste time polluting the world with complaints, because this is not Christian. Jesus instead invites us to look at life and the world starting from our heart. If we look inside ourselves, we will find almost all that we despise outside. And if, with sincerity, we will ask God to purify our heart, then indeed we will be starting to make the world cleaner.”<sup>3</sup>

Rather than complain, even to God— may we learn patience and trust, neither expecting our prayers to be answered immediately, nor presuming we have a right to a carefree life. Ultimately, the person most responsible for your happiness, is the very one you see each morning in the mirror.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Angelus Address*, 29 August, 2021