

Forward March! Well, Sort of....

The Eastman Kodak Company is a shadow of its former self. It filed for bankruptcy last year. Most people think that Kodak failed because it just didn't keep up with the times, but that's not true. In fact, Kodak invented digital photography. Did you know that? "So," you might say, "how did they go bankrupt?"

Kodak was great at innovation but lousy at doing business. They had great plans but poor follow through. Jordan Weissman, wrote an article for *The Atlantic Magazine* entitled, "What Killed Kodak?" He wrote:

...the company isn't in trouble because it stood still while the world turned. Rather Kodak has spent the past decade attempting to adapt to the changing times, often creating innovative new products, but failing to turn them into a sustainable business. ⁱ

You can have a great plan but if you can't activate the plan, you're not going to like the results.

The nation of Israel had been miraculously rescued from slavery by God. Now, they've been camping at the foot of Mount Sinai for 11 months where God has been showing them "The Plan" for living a life in obedience to Him. This plan included instructions on how to move through the desert, how to camp each night, how to worship Him, how to treat one another with fairness, and how to fight off the enemies they'll encounter. It was an innovative, complete and amazing plan. Now, in Numbers chapter 10, the day has come to put the plan into action. How will they move from the "planning" stage to the "action" stage? First, we see that...

I. They Began by Faith.

Check it out!

On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the Testimony. Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai and traveled from place to place until the cloud came to rest in the Desert of Paran. They set out, this first time, at the LORD'S command through Moses. (Num. 10:11-13)

Let's be reminded here, this was no easy task! There are 2 million people. They've got to move not just their own stuff but all the stuff for the Tabernacle. And only certain people can move the Tabernacle stuff because it's like radioactive material! If the wrong people touch it, they'll die.

But they pull it off! The cloud moves, the sons of Aaron blow the trumpets and the people all pack up and follow the cloud. The Levites with the cloud are out front followed by the tribe of Judah, which was twice as big as any other tribe, and then all the other tribes followed behind them. Now, let me just point out something that Cherie Herrman reminded me of this past week. If you had an aerial view of them marching, what would it look like? Because Judah was twice as big as any other tribe, it would have looked like a giant cross marching through the desert. So,

when Jesus looked down on His people from heaven, what did He see? He saw a cross.

It tells us in Num. 10:31-33 that everything was going just great. The plan was working well. Why? Because they followed the plan to a "T". Every morning and every night, Moses prayed a prayer of blessing over the people. They really were off to a great start. This only lasted three days, but it was still a great start!

Have you ever been in a place like that with God? Has there ever been a time in your life (maybe you're in a time like this right now!) where things are just going great. And you know why they're going so great – it's because you're following God's instructions to a "T". You're spending time with Him in prayer – every morning, every night. You're marching with the right priorities in place – God's cloud is out in front of you. His Word is directing you. Your interactions with other people are orderly and gracious. Even if you're marching through a desert right now, you're not panicked or full of fear because you know that God is with you. And even if you're attacked by some evil force, you have a plan for how to defend yourself. Isn't life great when you're following God's plan!

But what if life ISN'T all that great for you right now? Is it possible that the reason for that is that you've wandered off from God's plan? Most of the march that the Israelites were on was through a very inhospitable environment. Most of the time, they were traveling through desert. Liz and I have actually hiked in that desert. Without a complete and detailed plan, you will not survive for long walking through that desert. This world can be very inhospitable, have you noticed? If you're struggling with life right now, I strongly suggest that you talk to someone about getting back onto the path and the plan of God, marching with His people, being led by His Presence. Only God knows the way through your wilderness. We need to follow Him.

So, after a great start, what happened next? Well, it's not good because next:

II. The Complainers Came Out of Hiding.

Chapter 11, verses 1-3:

Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the LORD and the fire died down. So that place was called Taberah (which means "burning") because fire from the LORD had burned among them.

Do you know any complainers? Webster lists several synonyms for complaining. They are: whining, grumbling, murmuring, griping, to name but a few. Webster defines whining as, "...to complain or beg in a mean-spirited, objectionable way, using a nasal tone..." Oh yeah, now we've got the picture!

Okay, so, let's analyze this for a minute. Was it right for the people to be complaining? No. Why? Two primary reasons. First of all, their complaint is invalid. What's their complaint? That they had no meat to eat (Num. 11:4). Is that true? Actually, no. When they left Egypt, it specifically says that they took large flocks and herds of cattle with them (Ex. 12:32, 38). So, the people HAD meat to eat. So, what's their problem? Well, have you ever heard anyone in your family say, "There's

nothing to eat in this house!” Was that true? No. So, what was the problem? Do they have malnourished stomachs or malnourished souls?

The second reason it wasn't right for the people to complain was because they were grossly disrespecting God. Who was leading this march? God. What had God done for these people which should have caused them to give Him unending respect???? Just eleven months earlier He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and now He was taking them to a land that was fruitful and pleasant and free of charge! Beyond this, these same people had agreed to a covenant – they signed a contract voluntarily in which they said they would ALWAYS respect God and obey everything He asked them to do. So, their disrespect was actually equivalent to a private in the army writing a note to the General, telling him that he hated the food selection at the mess hall and would no longer obey orders until he got the food he demanded. How do you suppose that note would be received? There'd probably be more than just a little fire on the outskirts of the camp, don't you think? I think there might be some fire in that private's bed!!!

Now, here's a really interesting twist in this story. As we continue on with chapter 11 in Numbers, we hear how this complaining by the people was affecting Moses. Moses said to God: (Num. 11:11-15a)

...Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now...

What exactly is Moses doing here? Isn't he... complaining? So, why might God be allowing Moses to go through this difficult experience with the “complainers”? I know a person who was a pretty serious complainer until he got married, had kids, and got a taste of his own medicine.

Where does this seed of a sour attitude come from and how can you overcome it? Well, it comes from combining two things: a lack of trust in God and a highly elevated view of self. These complainers (and even Moses to some degree) believed they deserved a certain kind of treatment. Where did they get THAT expectation? A year earlier they had been slaves! A year earlier Moses had been a shepherd!! They should all be thrilled they were free!!! Yes, they were in a desert, but God was taking them THROUGH the desert to the Land of Promise. They all needed to eat a giant slice of humble pie, which, as we will see over the next couple of weeks, is exactly what God is about to serve them.

But how do we overcome this arrogant attitude and move away from a life of complaining toward a life of thankfulness? We do it by following the teaching of II Cor. 10:5:

...we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

But when you're suffering, is it really possible to “take every thought captive”?

On May 4, 1984 Presbyterian missionary, Benjamin Weir, was kidnapped by terrorists in Beirut, Lebanon. He was held in a small room with just a mattress and a radiator, which he was handcuffed to at all times. He was there for 16 months. When he was finally released, he was asked how he made it through. If it were you, what would you have been thinking about all that time? Benjamin Weir said:

I began to use what there was in that room to remind myself of the love of God. Those three wires coming down (from the ceiling) well, they reminded me of the way God's hand comes down and touches the hand of Adam in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. You remember how the gift of life is given in such a way? This meant God's gift of life. Then I counted the various slats on the Venetian blinds, and used the Venetian blind to remind myself that I was surrounded by a cloud of witnesses...

The cracks in the walls... each and every one of them I identified with some promise in Scripture. I would repeat to myself each day passages which had long been hidden in my heart. Passages like Philippians 4:7 'And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' And Jeremiah 33:3 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.'ⁱⁱ

Benjamin Weir took every fearful, panicky thought captive to make it obedient to Christ. He put his full trust in God. Where does trust in God come from? Well, trusting in God is just another way of saying "having faith in God." So, where does faith come from? Romans 10:17:

...faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

If you want to end your life as a "complainer," start spending more time in the Word of God and then begin to "take every thought captive."

Lastly, I want us to see one more important lesson in this passage. It is this...

III. Our God Is a Problem-Solving God.

So, the people are into the first week of God's amazing plan which if they follow it, will lead them to the Land of Promise. And already the wheels are in danger of coming off the bus. People are complaining and Moses knows how this could escalate. But Moses is the leader through whom God speaks to the people, so what is Moses going to do? And here we find a simple but very effective problem-solving method that God patiently gives to Moses (before he has a complete meltdown!)

God's method has four steps. **Step 1: Take a short look at the problem.** Most problems only deserve a short look. Pondering a problem for too long carries the danger of fixating on it. Identify the problem, yes; describe it as you see it to God and ask Him to give you the proper view of it. Num. 11:10 makes it clear that God saw the problem before Moses ever talked to Him about it. So, step one is to take a short look at the problem.

Step 2: Take a narrow look at yourself. Moses got too negative in his self-assessment. He measured his inabilities but not his abilities or his assets. What was Moses' greatest asset? God! Instead of listing God as an asset, Moses listed Him as a liability – "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant?" Take a narrow look at yourself which then leads us to...

Step 3: Take a long look at God. Rather than complaining, Moses should have been remembering his time with God on Mount Sinai, or at the Red Sea, or in Pharaoh's Palace, or at the burning bush, etc., etc., etc. We have such a "long suffering God" but do we see that? God is so very patient with Moses. He doesn't rebuke him, He just helps him. He has Moses bring Him 70 men and then God miraculously takes some of the leadership Spirit that He has anointed Moses with and He gives it to each of the 70 men so that they can distribute the burden of leadership among them all.

Are both the people and Moses complaining? Yes. But I believe God sees a difference between the people's complaint and Moses' complaint. Moses' complaint is legitimate. He has a real problem. Moses problem is the people who think they have a problem but really, they don't! So, God compassionately does not rebuke Moses for complaining but instead he fixes the problem for Him.

If we take a short look at our problem, a narrow look at ourselves and a long look at God, He will lead us to His fourth step in solving a problem which is – **Step 4: Take a wide look at the possibilities.** After Moses stopped complaining, God said to him:

Is the LORD'S arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you. (Num. 11:23)

For two days, quail dropped on the people so that each person had six bushels of quail! It was an all-you-can-eat night at the Desert Cafe! God's means of solving our problems are usually quite extravagant! If you'll stop complaining and put your trust in God, *you will see whether or not what He says will come true for you.*

A man retired from the Post Office and was sitting on his porch in Kentucky. When his first Social Security check was delivered, he opened the envelope, looked at the check and thought to himself, "Is this what life is going to be from now on – sitting on the porch waiting for my check to arrive?"

He decided he didn't want to settle for that so he made a list of all the things he had going for him, all the blessings and capacities, the unique things and assets that were his. The list was pretty long. Then he underlined those things that were really unique to him. One thing jumped out, it was the fact that he was the only person on earth who knew his mother's recipe for fried chicken. It used 11 different herbs and spices.

So, he went to a nearby restaurant and asked if he could cook the chicken for them. They said, "yes" and when they tasted it, they immediately put it on the menu. It quickly became the most popular item they served. So, he opened his own restaurant, and then others, and then a string of them. Eventually Harland Sanders sold the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise all across America and retired a second time but continued as a public relations rep until he died. ⁱⁱⁱ

What have your conversations with God sounded like recently? Complaining or praising? Take a short look at the problem, a narrow look at yourself, a long look at God and wide look at the possibilities. Moses was 15 years past the mandatory retirement age when he began the most important and impactful work of his life. What great adventure has God been planning for you? Today's the day to tell God, "You may have led me to a 'strange land,' but I trust you completely. Show me now

my next great adventure.” Then you will see whether or not what He says, all His promises, will come true for you. Let’s pray...

ⁱ Jordan Weissman, “What Killed Kodak?”, *The Atlantic*, Jan. 5, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Bruce Theilemann, Preaching Today, Tape #48

ⁱⁱⁱ From a sermon by Ross Foley, “A Black Spot on a White Board,” delivered June 11, 1995, Faith Covenant Church, Burnsville, MN.