

The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter

November/December 1983

Where Will Complaining Get You?

When we were in Dallas a few months ago, we were the guests of our dear friend Nina Jean Obel. As we sat one morning in her beautiful sunshiny yellow and pale green kitchen, she reminded us of the story in Deuteronomy 1 of how, when the Israelites were within fourteen days of the Promised Land, they complained. Complaining was a habit which had angered Moses, their leader, to the point where he wished he were dead. "How can I bear unaided the heavy burden you are to me, and put up with your complaints?" he asked. They headed for Horeb, but when they reached the hill country of the Amorites they refused to believe the promises and insisted on sending spies to see what sort of a land it was. The spies came back with a glowing report, but the people didn't believe that either. Never mind the lovely fruit the land offered. There were giants there. They'd all be killed. There were huge fortifications towering to the sky. How would they ever conquer them?

It was the neurotic's attitude. No answer would do. No solution offered was good enough. The promises of God, the direction of Moses, the report of the spies—all unacceptable. The people had already made up their minds that they didn't like anything God was doing. They "muttered treason." They said the Lord hated them. He brought them out only to have them wiped out by the Amorites. O God, what a fate. O God, why do you treat us this way? O God, how are we going to get out of this? It's your fault. You hate us. Moses hates us. Everything and everybody's against us.

Nina Jean said she made up her mind that if complaining was the reason God's people were

denied the privilege of entering Canaan, she was going to quit it. She set herself a tough task: absolutely no complaining for fourteen days. It was a revelation to her—first, of how strong a habit it had become, and second, of how different the whole world looked when she did not complain. I get the impression when I'm around Nina Jean that the fourteen-day trial was enough to kick the habit. I've never heard her complain.

It's not just the sunshine and the colors that make her kitchen a nice place to be. It's that Nina Jean is there. I'd like to create that sort of climate for the people I'm around. I've set myself the same task.

Note: Nina Jean's husband, Arne, lost his life in a plane crash in mid-October. Please pray for their friends and family.

What If My Wife Doesn't Feel Called?

This question is often asked by men who are preparing to be ministers or missionaries. I've never heard it asked by anyone who was headed for the insurance business, medicine, or an airline pilot's career. The ministry and the mission field are the ones to which people somehow believe there has to be a special call, separate and distinct from all other vocations, requiring a powerful spiritual revelation of some kind for the wife as well as for the husband. And if she hasn't got it, there's just nothing he can do about it except change his plans.

Not to try to answer the question about *his* call—that is a different kind of question—I would

make one or two suggestions to the wife if she would let me. Because Eve was made especially for Adam—to be his responder, his adapter, his help (“meet,” suitable, fit) for his need—it follows that it is the woman who is God’s gift to the man (not vice versa, in this special sense). He is the wooer, the initiator, the *head*, under God. When a woman consents to marry a man, she (if she’s a Christian) should think about the relationship between Christ the Bridegroom and the Church, His Bride. The Church responds to His call. The Bride relinquishes her independence, her name, her destiny, her plans for “a life of her own” (remember Jesus’ words: “If anyone wants to follow me, let him give up his right to himself”), her family, her home, and perhaps even her country to join the life of this man. She accepts his destiny, his name, his future, and everything else as her own. If she is called to be his wife, she is called to support and encourage him in the work God gives him to do. (The source of these perorations is not *Why I Feel Good about Being Submissive*, by Elisabeth Elliot [don’t order it—there is no such book], but the Book of Books—check out what it says about Christ and His Bride, and then ask Him to help you live by that paradigm. I’m asking every day.)

Common Courtesy

Talking with a group of seminary students I mentioned that the common rules of courtesy are often overlooked nowadays, especially by those who grew up in the past two decades, an era in which all conventions and traditions were suspect. “Mere convention” came to mean “pure hypocrisy.” If a thing was labelled “traditional” it had to be discarded as no longer “relevant,” “meaningful,” or even intelligent. If a man had the temerity to hold a door open for a woman, he was sometimes labelled “sexist.” My point in bringing up the subject of courtesy was simply that it is a small way of demonstrating that deep principle, central to our Christian faith, of “my life for yours.” I asked if any of the husbands in the room made a habit of helping their wives into their chairs at the table, even when company was not

present. A week later one of the men stopped me in the seminary hall.

“I just want to tell you that my behavior toward my wife has been altered since last week’s lecture. And you know what? It’s changed my attitude toward her as well as hers toward me. It’s really been revelatory! Just wanted to say thanks.”

I was immensely cheered. It’s always cheering to know somebody has had ears to hear, and has actually done something about what he’s heard.

What the Bible Meant to My Father

Today I had lunch in my mother’s kitchen, and as usual she had placed a few papers at my place, things she wanted to share with me. This time it was a copy of a commencement address given by my father (Philip E. Howard, Jr., editor of the *Sunday School Times*, a weekly magazine published in Philadelphia for more than a hundred years). This was his closing paragraph, a challenge to the men graduating from Faith Theological Seminary in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1941:

“The Bible is the bread of life that always satisfies; the staff that never breaks; the sword that finds the joints in the Enemy’s armor and drives him off; the chart in which there is no error; the compass that never deviates and always points to Christ; the telescope that gives a view of the whole course of human history; the microscope that explains the mysteries of life; the balm that soothes our pain; the medicine that cures our ills; the cordial that cheers our fainting spirits; the light that shines undimmed amid the darkness of this world and points the way to our Father’s house.”

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Letters

"Just read your article 'Working Mothers.' My daughter has a master's degree in education but has not taught school since her children came. It has been hard for them to live these six years on one salary, but they had agreed that she would stay home with the children. She loves it—keeping things in order, being available to do things as a family. They have very little money, but the Lord looks after them and they know it. Last winter little Patrick was in the hospital. Their insurance did not cover everything, and the father is working very hard to pay off the bills. Jeanie has lots of pressure from friends. Sometimes she wonders if she should go back to teaching, dropping her children off with a babysitter. In her heart, she knows she can't. She would be tired at night, have papers to grade, lesson plans to make, and her thoughts would be on tomorrow at school. Her own children—their baths and bedtime stories and prayers—would suffer. If a mother has to work I think the Lord will help if you rely wholly upon Him. But it's not easy, letting Him be in control and trying to balance a job and a family. Thanks for the article."

"I wish you could briefly address the question of wives being thankful for their husbands' gifts—acceptance, even praise for, the '90% that's right about the gift, not the 10% that's wrong'—size, color, etc. My husband gave me a box of cigars, an electronic pinball machine, and a miniature electric drill for our first Christmas. I've learned some valuable lessons about the nature of love since I burst into tears that Christmas. This year the gifts were the same, but the smiles and gratitude were genuine. I found that accepting his gifts with both hands helps me to see him grow taller and taller. It is not that I am blind to his faults, but my eyes are wide open to his virtues. Bless the Lord, I've found that 'ice water' is as deadly to husbands as it is to plants!"

My Vow.

Whatsoever Thou sayest unto me, by thy grace I will do it.

My Constraint.

Thy love, O Christ, my Lord.

My Confidence.

Thou art able to keep that which I have committed unto Thee.

My Joy.

To do Thy will, O God.

My Discipline.

That which I would not choose, but which Thy love appoints.

My Prayer.

Conform my will to Thine.

My Portion.

The Lord is the portion of my inheritance.

Teach us, good Lord, to serve Thee more faithfully; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labor and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do Thy will, O Lord our God.

(from *Gold Cord* by Amy Carmichael, 1867-1957, founder of the Dohnavur Fellowship of South India)

Prayer Requests

- Pray for ministers of the Gospel, that in spite of the decline of authority they may preach the Word without fear, aiming not for popularity for themselves, or for the congregation to "feel comfortable," but aiming to speak the truth and to speak it with grace and love. Pray that the people will be doers of the Word, not hearers or talkers only.
- Pray for those you heard about on the news this morning, or read about in the paper, who need prayers today. Ask God to bring to mind friends who need prayer—He knows why they need it.

Questions and Answers

When we suffer as a result of our own sins does it have the same "nobility" as suffering from "outside"—e.g., the death of a loved one, disasters, illness, persecution, etc? (This was asked in a recent seminar.)

There is no nobility in suffering itself. It is our response to suffering that determines its effect on character. We can, to use the words of J.B. Phillips' translation of James 1, resent trouble as an intruder or welcome it as a friend. It is quite impossible, apart from God's grace, to welcome trouble as a friend. It is possible, however, when we realize that it comes to test our faith and to produce in us the quality of endurance. The Bible gives us many other reasons for suffering (see for example Jn 14:31; 15:2; 2 Cor 1:6; Heb 12:10; Rom 8:29; 1 Pt 1:7; 4:13; Jn 12:24), but none will do us the least good if we do not respond in trust and acceptance. "Be careful that none of you fails to respond to the grace which God gives, for if he does there can very easily spring up in him a bitter spirit which is not only bad in itself but can also poison the lives of many others." (Heb 12:15, JBP)

If the suffering is the result of our own sin, let us first receive the forgiveness which God promises when we confess, and then let us, in humility and patience, bear whatever the human consequences may be, confident even in the midst of them that the Lord looks on us with love and tenderness. It is because He loves us that He must correct us.

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The Reverend Theodore Williams of India says that the Greek name *paraclete*, used of the Holy Spirit, derives from the word for one who runs alongside a fainting soldier and cheers him to keep fighting. He keeps the one who is reaching the breaking point from breaking.

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Travel Schedule November/December 1983

November 3-4 Edmonton, Alberta, North American Baptist College Divinity School, A.J. Petrie, 403-437-1960.

November 5-6 Linden, Alberta, Mennonite Brethren Church, Arnie Neufeld, 403-546-3877 or 3984.

November 11-12 Union Mills, North Carolina, Episcopal Renewal Conference, "PEWSACTION," Derek Hawksbee, South American Missionary Society, Union Mills.

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