

Dear Friends,

If God gave you a daily choice, 1) complain about whatever you see that doesn't measure up to your expectations, or 2) go to your knees and thank Him for all the good things He has showered over your life, which would you choose? At first glance, this might seem like a foolish question. If given this choice daily, who would think for a nanosecond about choosing to complain? Ah, but doesn't the Lord actually give us this choice daily? And what do we choose?

Increasingly, I come to believe that we preachers spend far too little time preaching on this topic. If we follow the teaching of Scripture, we should regularly warn our congregations that the Lord does not approve of complaining attitudes. The same sermons that warn believers, "Sin not," should equally warn them, "Complain not."

I do not advocate the "Pollyanna" ignore anything bad and pretend attitude. Quite the opposite. Every life, whatever its appearance to us in a given moment, faces fierce difficulties. Storm clouds gather in every life, and sometimes they may send a tornado into that life! You may simply observe that person on one of their easy days.

Our choice is not between that person who appears in our momentary view to have the perfect life and our own life of ups and downs. It is between the Lord and us. Do we choose to look to Him in faith and work our way through our trials with Him by our side, and with Him directing our strategy, or do we choose to ignore Him and His wise counsel? Life can dish up mirror opposite results simply because of where we focus our minds. Focus your mind on your trial or difficulty of the moment. Tomorrow you may need to focus on another difficulty. You likely will end up simply shifting daily--or hourly for that matter--from one difficulty to another. Or we can choose to look past our difficulty to the Lord who is always bigger, stronger, and better than any difficulty we shall ever face. Look at the trial and weep. Look at the Lord and rejoice, even as you struggle through your difficulty. Our choice!

Clearly by my recent choice of passages and themes, my mind has pondered these questions and the Bible's wise and encouraging words. Talk to yourself or to others about all your concerns, and they will likely respond with caring compassion, but they can do precious little other than listen. Talk to the Lord about those things, and leave them, truly leave them with Him to handle. He may show you how to handle them, or He may handle them Himself, or sometimes He will simply remind you of Paul's "Thorn in the flesh" issue, and remind you, "My grace is sufficient." Regardless, when we take our problems to the Lord, we have more help than we could ever imagine. So very often, He has a way of working things out so much better than we could have imagined. That is why He is God, and we are not!

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

God Mercifully Answers Prayer

And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord: and the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp. And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto the Lord, the fire was quenched. (Numbers 11:1-2 KJV 1900)

Bad habits have a way of entrenching themselves into our minds. And the habit of complaining may claim top spot in the list of the most stubborn habits. Our study passage doesn't tell us why the people complained. But a study of the forty years of wilderness wandering will document that the people made a steady habit of complaining. The path they were traveling was difficult. The food they ate in the wilderness didn't measure up to the leek and garlic seasoned food they ate in Egypt, even as slaves. They found reason to complain often.

How do we compare with them? Have we spent much time during the last eight months complaining about the impact COVID-19 had on our lives? Even if we haven't been infected by the virus, it impacts the way we do most things in our daily lives. Sandra and I haven't been in a grocery store in eight months. Our visits with family have been outside and with a minimum of six feet distance. We are a "Hugging" family. I can tell you; I could easily slip into the habit of complaining at the present "Air hug" versus greeting a family member with a real hug.

What often drives a complaining disposition? Of course, a multitude of issues trigger complaints. Likely, most of the time people complain about something over which they have no control. Example, people quite frequently complain about the weather. It is too hot, too cold, too dry, too wet. Whatever the weather is today seems to be the worst possible condition it could be. I find a similar thread often in people's complaining about other people. They have no control over that person or what that person says or does, so they complain about whatever he/she says or does.

If lack of control—and our subsequent desire to gain control—drives a complaint, there is an element of unbelief present. If whatever that person is saying or doing happens to threaten my safety or spiritual health, does the Lord know? Can He hinder or stop that person from the action to protect me? Indeed, He can. So, rather than complain, why not go to our knees and ask the Lord to deal with the person and the situation wisely and graciously?

David describes the "Happy" people by praying "*That there be no complaining in our streets.*" (Psalm 144:14b) In this light, consider the faith factor in light of Psalm 23:1, "*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*" I wonder. Could we not also imply from this verse, "*I shall not complain*"? If we focus our minds on our caring and abundantly supplying Shepherd, we lose our incentive to complain. Rather than complain, we are more moved to say a prayer of thanksgiving.

A steady inclination to complain indicates the likely presence of discontentment in our minds. If we are inclined to live in a discontented mindset, we steadily rob ourselves of blessings that constantly flow through our lives.

But godliness with contentment is great gain. (1 Timothy 6:6; emphasis added)

How sadly this verse describes far too many believers in our day. They are decent, caring, godly people. But they seldom find that lingering peaceful fruit of a contented spirit. They allow their minds to focus on what is wrong when so many things in their world are so right. They rob themselves of one of the greatest blessings of believing and following Jesus. The discontented attitude is also about as contagious as COVID-19. If we allow it to control us, including our tongue, we will influence others to be just as discontented as we.

Consider the impact of the complaining spirit on Israel during the season following their exit from Egypt. If the spies who investigated the land that God promised to give them had looked at their God and His gracious power and care for them, would most of them have reported to Moses all about the obstacles to occupying that land? Or would they have joined Joshua and Caleb with a good report? That spirit cost them and their offspring forty painful wandering years in the wilderness, years they could have been living in that land "Flowing with milk and honey." And the same disposition robs many believers today of the same spiritual richness. In symbolic form, they spend their lives in the wilderness when they could be enjoying the "Land of milk and honey."

We see this same pattern in the New Testament.

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1-2)

Whether we tap into those blessings or not, we “*stand*” in a rich flow of God’s grace. However, we can access that grace only by actively seeking it in faith. In effect, we are “Knee deep” in grace, but we can’t reach a molecule of it apart from active faith. Why do we fail to enrich our lives with that grace? We make that choice. God’s rich treasures surround us. We may freely choose to tap into them and find His “Kingdom” treasures, new and old, to transform our lives. Or we may choose to ignore those blessings and live our lives as spiritual paupers.

And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord. If we could learn the reality of this simple point from Moses, how powerfully it would impact our lives for the better. Memorize these words. Repeat them to yourself daily, first thing in the morning, for at least a month. At the end of that month, take inventory of your mood and “Contentment” factor during that month. Was it worth your effort? Did you realize greater blessings than in the prior month? Consider. Those extra blessings were yours all along; you simply chose to ignore them in favor of your complaining. Where did you realize the greater blessing? A more obvious sense of the Lord’s presence and blessings?

...the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp. In Romans 11:22, Paul reminds us of both “...*the goodness and severity of God.*” In that context, Paul reminds us that we consciously choose which of these options we shall experience. If we choose to live in the Lord’s goodness by fashioning our lives to His example, believing in Jesus, we choose goodness. If we ignore His example and go our own ways, we choose severity. As you read the description of the Lord’s “Severity,” His judgment against His own people for their complaining spirit, ponder. Why would we knowingly choose to receive that righteous severity? Especially when we may just as readily choose His goodness and live in the land flowing with milk and honey.

And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto the Lord, the fire was quenched. Moses doesn’t tell us how the Lord’s fire burned among the people. However, the people fully understood that the calamity was a judgment from the Lord. During the last eight months, I’ve been asked on several occasions, “Do you believe COVID-19 is a judgment from the Lord?” And my answer has consistently been no. Folks who live too close to a convicted conscience tend to make every bad thing that happens in their world a judgment from the Lord. I do not subscribe to this mindset for several reasons. First, Israel was God’s chosen people. They lived under His protective care and providence. They also carried His worship with them. It was therefore necessary that they frequently realize both the Lord’s judgments and His blessings. Our nation has been blessed far above what it deserves. Sadly, the passionate race away from God that dominates our culture today is setting the stage for major and sobering changes in our future. However, our country is not God’s present-day Israel. It is one country out of several hundred in the world. Our country is not God’s “New Israel.”

My second reason for not seeing divine judgment in every calamity that occurs is that God’s judgments in Scripture follow a specific pattern. In that pattern, the Lord first sends warnings from His men to His people. They are told quite specifically what they are doing that inflamed His righteous anger toward them. They are commanded, and given reasonable space, to repent. Only when they have ignored His warnings and refused to repent does He finally send judgment. And that judgment always falls in such a unique manner that they know without question or doubt that a divine judgment fell upon them. If the Lord sends a judgment, people will not need to ask, “Do you think this is a judgment from the Lord?” They will know.

Why do I doubt that our present calamity is a divine judgment? It lacks pretty much all these unique features that consistently follow the pattern of divine judgment that we see manifest in Scripture.

Is it possible that God’s people might so conduct themselves that the Lord would mercifully intervene and shorten this calamity? Indeed, it is. If we hope to gain the Lord’s intervening deliverance, our first

and most important step is to stop pointing fingers at “Them,” whoever “Them” happens to be in our minds, and start looking within. Instead of telling the Lord that surely the betrayer is Judas, we need to follow the example of the eleven, “**Lord, is it I?**” (Matthew 26:22; Mark 14:19)

The people crying to Moses implies an acknowledgment that they knew they had sinned, knew what their sin was, and were moving away from it, at least for the moment. How did Moses react to their plea? Without hesitation or explanation, Moses prayed for them. And how did the Lord respond to Moses’ prayer? Just as immediately as it fell upon them “...**the fire was quenched.**” This passage should be added to our growing list of Bible lessons that uniformly document and affirm the Bible truth. **God does hear, and He does answer our prayers.** Pagan fatalism may pretend that our God is a glorified rock, never feeling, never caring, and never changing to send His providential deliverance to our aid. But Scripture abounds with example after example that follows the pattern we see in this lesson. When the Lord’s people pray, confess their sins, and seek the Lord’s forgiveness and healing from their sins, He responds in loving fatherly forgiveness and restoration. Honestly, do you believe you’d be alive today to think about this question had the Lord not, many times, heard your confessing prayer, and forgiven you? If God never intended to answer our prayers, why did He include so many examples of answered prayer in the Bible?

Elder Joe Holder