

Querulous No More  
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Murmuring and complaining is not okay. It doesn't take a brilliant mind to observe this fact. The account of the wilderness experience in Exodus is God's judgment on murmuring and complaining. God doesn't like it.

Some commentator cited Jacob's speech (Gen. 42:36 **And Jacob their father said to them, "You have bereaved me of all my children; Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has come against me.**) and attributed it to his being a "querulous old man." I had no idea what *querulous* meant—maybe you don't either—so I will start off sharing what I learned from my accessible on-line dictionary about querulousness:

**querulous** -adj.

1. Given to complaining; peevish.
2. Expressing a complaint or grievance; grumbling: a querulous voice; querulous comments.

**querulousness** -noun:

1. the quality of being given to complaining, pettishness, snappishness, surliness, biliousness, peevishness, irritability, and temper - a disposition to exhibit uncontrolled anger; "his temper was well known to all his employees"

[Middle English querulose, litigious, quarrelsome, from Old French querelos, from Late Latin querulōsus, querulous, from Latin querulus, from querī, to complain; see kwes- in Indo-European roots.]

(The Free Dictionary, on-line at:

[https://www.thefreedictionary.com/querulousness#:~:text=querulousness%20%2D%20the%20quality%20of%20being,known%20to%20all%20his%20employees%22\)](https://www.thefreedictionary.com/querulousness#:~:text=querulousness%20%2D%20the%20quality%20of%20being,known%20to%20all%20his%20employees%22)

Oh, I thought, querulous is a fancy word summing up murmuring and complaining. I don't suppose God likes querulousness very much either.

So Jacob became querulous in his old age . . . that's unfortunate. I wonder how he came to be like that? Well, the matter covered in Gen. 42, between Joseph and his brothers just might have something to do with how Jacob so declined from the man of faith to querulousness. Then, I confess, the first thing I thought, honestly, is this: I certainly hope that I don't go in that direction . . . *that would not be good!* My father did so. But, thankfully, he curbed it somewhat when he was confronted about it! Perhaps some of your elderly parents also may have declined in this manner, too. I would hate to take to murmuring and complaining, I will have to resist the cultivated querulousness in the media—we are culturally inundated with negativity, now aren't we?

I want to pause and reflect with you on the personal nature of sermon preparation. Specifically I want to share that it is amazing how often my personal devotional time ties into the theme of my current sermon. September 8th is a prime example. I read **Say not I will recompense evil, but wait on the Lord, and he will save you.** (Proverbs 20:22) Therefore I went to Proverbs 20 to check out the context of this saying and here is what I discovered: **If one curses his father or mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness.** (v. 20) The

penny dropped. Oh, so that is what Joseph's brothers were doing to Jacob! They were *cursing* their father by faking the death of Joseph, by lying about the matter. Even the prior business of slaughtering the town of Shechem was calculated to **cause a stench**—they were angry lads striking out at their father. They were **recompensing evil** (with evil!); it was “pay-back” for their pain over Jacob's favoritism and absentee parenting. What Jacob's favoritism meant was a fatherless condition for them—they missed out on his attention, affection and direction. *That could help explain their wildness and impulsivity!* That neglect, expressing as it did Jacob's selfish absorption with his needs, hopes, interests and dreams, recreated in them the same selfishness, the same callousness and cruelty. They came by their carnality naturally. The famine of familial affection produced dishonor in the family which only intensified as the years went by. The incident with Joseph occurred fairly late in the game; he was a youth, they were grown men, vicious adults.

Having shared this much, you can surely appreciate how pertinent these insights were to my sermon preparation. But there is more. I am referring to Oswald Chambers' Devotions for a Deeper Life (Zondervan, 1986, p. 168). “If you can show someone how to be delivered from the torture of sin, or healed of a pain-ridden body, or loosed from a terrible past, then you have that person as your friend.” Now Joseph in our text accomplishes two of the three (healing from pain is omitted). *He spiritually befriended his spiteful brothers who twenty-plus years prior had attempted to murder him.* That, too, is astonishingly pertinent to the sermon. However, Chambers, continues to say “Yet, the ‘prince of this world’ would convince us that we can have these benefits of the gospel without having to surrender ourselves to the Lord Jesus.” In Joseph's context this would be *surrender to God*. Chambers then outlines the futility of applying scriptural teaching, temperament, various spiritual disciplines, “Still there have been no results.” “*You have been trying to find out what is wrong.* And that is where you are mistaken. God will never show you what is wrong with someone else; that is not your business. He wants you to bring the case to him.” And that is precisely, what the spiritually-centered Joseph is able to effect for his brothers! With spiritual wisdom, he draws them to the place where they can enter into the presence of God—then comes conviction, confession and repentance. Marvelous parallels, right? I thank God for this collusion!

Therefore, I picked up on the contrast between Jacob's late life posture, his negative philosophy, and compared it to the outlook of Hezekiah as reflected in his psalm—written after his recovery from a life-threatening sickness—probably the existence of Hezekiah's psalm is news to you, it was to me. Anyway, I cite it here in its entirety:

Isaiah 38:10-20

New American Standard Bible

10 I said, “In the middle of my [a]life  
I am to enter the gates of Sheol;  
I am to be deprived of the rest of my years.”

11 I said, “I will not see the Lord,  
The Lord in the land of the living;  
I will look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world.

12 “Like a shepherd's tent my dwelling is pulled up and removed from me;  
As a weaver I rolled up my life.  
He cuts me off from the loom;  
From day until night You make an end of me.

13 “I composed my soul until morning.  
Like a lion—so He breaks all my bones,

From day until night You make an end of me.

14 “Like a swallow, like a crane, so I twitter;  
I moan like a dove;  
My eyes look wistfully to the heights;  
O Lord, I am oppressed, be my security.

15 “What shall I say?

[b]For He has spoken to me, and He Himself has done it;  
I will wander about all my years because of the bitterness of my soul.

16 “O Lord, by these things men live,  
And in all these is the life of my spirit;

[c]O restore me to health and let me live!

17 “Lo, for my own welfare I had great bitterness;  
It is You who has [d]kept my soul from the pit of [e]nothingness,  
For You have cast all my sins behind Your back.

18 “For Sheol cannot thank You,  
Death cannot praise You;  
Those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness.

19 “It is the living who give thanks to You, as I do today;  
A father tells his sons about Your faithfulness.

20 “The Lord will surely save me;  
So we will play my songs on stringed instruments  
All the days of our life at the house of the Lord.”

#### Footnotes

- a. Isaiah 38:10 Lit days
- b. Isaiah 38:15 Targum and DSS read And what shall I say for He
- c. Isaiah 38:16 Lit You will
- d. Isaiah 38:17 So some versions; Heb. loved
- e. Isaiah 38:17 Or destruction

It is hardly possible to come up with a starker contrast than that between Jacob's **All this has come against me.** and verses 15-17 of this psalm by Hezekiah. What happened to God's promise to Jacob, **I will be with you . . . I will surely prosper you** (Ge. 32:9, 12) which promise God surely did keep? How did what God did for good turn into **against me**?! I alluded to the matter between Joseph and his brothers before so I will spell it out preliminarily, right now: Jacob's spiritual decline may have been occasioned in part by the attempted fratricide (Joseph's brothers hated him and tried to kill him some twenty-three years prior to this meeting, Joseph would be in his late thirties). Joseph's brothers then lied, faked his death and kept up the pretense for decades! That was a blow to Jacob's spirit, the grief nearly destroyed him, which left him reeling spiritually. However, the hatred, wicked deceit and lying were coupled with Jacob's carnality, his spirit of selfishness—his sons came by their crafty self-advantage seeking naturally enough. Jacob did not deal with loss well. Rachel's death in the birth of Benjamin, and then the purported death of Joseph, his favorite son, dragged him down from the height attained at Bethel where Jacob kept his vow, worshipped God and outwardly prospered! The decline was gradual, not precipitous. Another way to frame it is to assert that his old nature reasserted itself and the result was the querulous old man we meet here.

Hezekiah's **He Himself has done it** indicates a submission to the will of God absent in Jacob's despondent unbelief. But Hezekiah affirms that the **bitterness of his soul** was good for him—yes, **by these things men live**, he means that *afflictions (these things)* are life-giving, not death dealing. They are instructive, medicinal, stimulative, strengthening, produce endurance and preparatory. They may not be pleasant, but God causes good to come from them. **In all these is the life of my spirit** declares Hezekiah. Now what's truly amazing is that Joseph would align himself with Hezekiah more than with his father! **You meant it for evil, God repurposed it for good—that many might live.**

Let's hold that thought: *that many might live*. That is the great theme of Joseph's story. Oh, right, famine, food . . . keeping people alive, free from starvation. That is the obvious level of the narrative. Joseph interprets the dreams, becomes governor, makes preparation for seven prosperous years so that when the catastrophe of seven years of no harvest hits, the world will survive. Okay. But the wisdom of God is displayed in Joseph's "spiritually masterful" coping with his ten brothers, too. They are spiritually dead men walking. The life they are leading is no life at all. And Joseph serves as *their deliverer* from denial, deceit, lying and real guilt. Two of them were vicious murderers, Simeon and Levi, and all of them were accomplices in attempted fratricide (brother murder) when they plotted to kill Joseph and ended selling him into slavery—a social existence of obscurity, of "being no more"—as if, dead in fact. They were callous, cruel, indifferent and wicked; they perpetrated evil. Remember, they were **cursing their father** (very unwise) even as Jacob had earlier cursed and deceived Isaac—their life was one of gathering extinction, **their lamp was about to be put out in prison!** They languished under the accusation of being spies—the very thing they held against Joseph! How apt. The prison was, assuredly, a very, very dark place.

**By wisdom is a house built . . . established** (Prov. 24:3)  
. . . a family re-integrated, healed, served and led.

So, they show up. Unexpectedly. And Joseph has the opportunity to even the score—the power, and authority to use it. That's where Romans 12 comes in:

**17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.** [a] **Respect what is right in the sight of all men.** **18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.** **19 Never take your own revenge, beloved,** but [b] **leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.** **20 "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."** **21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

Footnotes

a. Romans 12:17 Lit **Take thought for**

b. Romans 12:19 Lit **give a place**

It is as if Joseph had access to Romans 12, which he didn't, but because he possessed wisdom from God, we have no reason to suppose that God didn't instruct Joseph in just these matters, in just that way—even way back then. Indeed, this passage reads like a character reference for Joseph! Joseph was guided by divine wisdom in delivering his brothers from death to life. Remember, that his brothers come as a result of the famine being severe in Canaan. And Joseph uses spiritual power to effect a transformation of their hearts, as well as to heal Jacob's family of its crippling dysfunction—a dysfunction rooted in selfishness and carnality. These being the imprisoning sins of Jacob!

In a real sense Joseph's rise to power is paralleled by his assumption of the place of "fathering" his brothers. He disciplines them and corrects them and guides them! He becomes the "head" they needed, and the one they heeded. There is by divine mercy a timely transition of headship in the family of Jacob. Joseph governs in Egypt and in the home—caring for all, forgiving sins and providing equitably. It is Joseph who restores wholeness to the broken family, bringing it unity and bringing all into the presence of God . . . which is a far greater, nobler and better thing than revenge! *In fact this is a better story than any revenge tale I can recall!*

Jacob is the third generation driven to Egypt by famine! The Promised Land was prone to famine and its devastation—hardly a land of milk and honey. It couldn't even sustain the people and herds of two wealthy sheiks (Abraham and Lot)! It would take a divine miracle to transform it into a land capable of sustaining a whole nation! But the bigger story is the one of spiritual transformation just alluded to.

I want to close by reflecting with you about spiritual power—the kind Joseph wielded *which are accessible to all who walk with the Lord*. Spiritual power comes from God himself. God has surpassing greatness of power. And as I noted last week, his mercy is as great as his might! Spiritual power is inconsistent with human devices, with manipulative techniques. And it is manifest through the Spirit of God—this power comes not to the trained, the competent, and confident only but to those God ordains for it to come, to those who are faithful, and dependent. God gives this power to those who walk with him, who keep company with him. It takes the form of divine enablement by which one can save, keep, sanctify and serve others. Spiritual results are the product of spiritual power—not secular, or political power. **Joseph relies on God to work on his brothers' hearts**, convicting them of sin, convincing them of guilt and for bringing them to repentance (a repentance which leads to forgiveness). Joseph's employment of anonymity, his harshness, his apparent callousness and cruelty are spiritually conceived methods of confrontation—they are, as it were, the discipline of the Lord ministered through him. *It is entirely selfless and therein lies its power!* Spiritual selflessness is the only force capable of countering the selfishness that held Jacob in bondage to his insecurity and fear—the sentiments which promoted greed and his bargaining obsessions.

His sons were too like him! They needed to become more like Joseph—mind you, they didn't have Jesus to aspire after. His godly motives rendered his spiritual power efficacious—it always does. It produces godly results. May God enable us to employ spiritual power through spiritual means to his glory and for the furtherance of the kingdom . . . and the good of all. Show us what to do and give us the confidence to do it . . . remove all hesitation. **Amen.**