

A BALM IN GILEAD (Jer. 8:22)

"Sometimes I feel discouraged,
and think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.

"There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul."

That's what we sing from the old hymn book.

The prophet Jeremiah felt discouraged in his day about the prospects for spiritual healing for his beloved people, and in one of his elegies, he asked: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" The implied answer to these questions here is "No, there is no balm, no physician."

Bible dictionaries or encyclopedias tell us that this "balm of Gilead" was a spicy resin widely-known long ago for its healing qualities. It probably received its name by being exported from Gilead in Transjordan to Egypt and Phoenicia. It was antiseptic and was used for irritations of the skin and other diseases and wounds. Some ancient historians said Jericho was the natural home of the shrub or tree which produced the balm resin, but it may have flourished around the Sea of Galilee, and other parts of the Bible Lands, besides in Gilead east of the Jordan.

In the Far East, especially around the Singapore region, Tiger Balm is widely used as a healing salve. I happen to have a sample with me today, along with a paper which claims that it is a "safe and reliable treatment for the relief of muscular aches and pains, sprains, rheumatism, insect bites, itching, lumbago, headache, and toothache." Most of us are skeptical of such claims for the effectiveness of Tiger Balm, but apparently the Balm of Gilead was indeed effective for healing of many wounds and irritations of the skin, and possibly for other diseases also in its day, when pharmacology was not so advanced as it is today.

I. As the old hymn suggests, we desperately need some kind of balm to make wounded spirits whole.

A. Many have been wounded in their hearts by harsh, unkind, and untrue words, spoken in malice by people who, we thought, were friends, and by people whom we trusted and had confidence in.

In Zechariah 13:6, someone asks, "What are these wounds on your back?" The sad answer is, "The wounds I received in the house of my friends." Indeed, the cruelest wounds are those we receive in the house of God, and from our christian friends there, from whom we expected better treatment.

B. Some wounds are caused not by mere words, but by unkind, unchristian, and undeserved deeds, action, and treatment by those who ~~who~~ should know better and should behave otherwise. Do you feel that you have sometimes been "used" by others to advance their own selfish or ambitious desires? How should a christian respond to such treatment? Listen to the words of Jesus, "Pray for them which despitefully use you" (Mt. 5:44, KJV). We are not to hate them, or to treat them as they have treated us; we are to love them and pray for them.

C. The implied answer in Jeremiah chapter 8, verse 22, was "No," but ~~the promise~~ later in chapter 33, verse 6, is a sure promise from the Lord, "Behold, I will bring ~~to~~ health and healing, and will reveal unto them the abundance of prosperity and security." How marvelous! We may go through times of discouragement and testing, but ultimately the Lord will provide a healing balm for broken spirits, and a cure for all discouragements and trials!

II. And the sin-sick soul desperately needs a healing balm for his or her spiritual sickness.

A. The Bible often compares sin with sickness.

B. Jesus compares himself with the Great Physician. Matthew 9:12 gives the words of Jesus: "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick....I came not to call the righteous but sinners." The old theologians would say, "Jesus Christ, the great Physician of value, the only sovereign Physician of the soul, by his blood and Spirit cures all our spiritual sicknesses."

Sometimes it seems that no priest, or prophet, no physician, ~~or~~ healer, ~~or~~ teacher, or psychiatrist, ~~that~~ can cure the sick heart and tortured mind. But Jesus, the Great Physician can do it.

Notice the context of this passage in Matthew. Where was Jesus when he said, "They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick"? He was visiting and eating with publicans and sinners, people who were excluded and ostracized by the pharisaical religious establishment. I believe Jesus did this, and said this on this occasion, to show that religious ostracism and exclusion were wrong and foolish among professing christian believers. You do not win friends and influence people by treating them as outcasts and imposing a spiritual quarantine on fellow members of the church of Jesus Christ. The church today that does not hear and follow the example and teaching of Jesus in these matters is convicted by its Lord.

C. Once in hopeless despair Job (13:4) said to his false counselors, "You are all physicians of no value" (KJV) or "worthless physicians" (RSV). Have you noticed how physicians in the Bible often have a "bum rap" or "bad press"? Mark tells us (5:26) about a woman who "had suffered many things of physicians;" ~~but~~ Dr. Luke adds the details that she had spent all her living on physicians, but had not been helped by them (Lk 8:43). There were many physicians "of no value, or worthless" in those pre-scientific times. But Jesus is the Great Physician of Supreme Value. He has never lost a patient.

D. There IS a healing balm for such wounded spirits. It is found in the love and grace of God, in the redemption of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit.

"The great Physician now is near,
The sympathizing Jesus;
He speaks the drooping heart to cheer,
Oh! hear the voice of Jesus.

"His name dispels my guilt and fear,
No other name but Jesus;
Oh! how my soul delights to hear
The charming name of Jesus."

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