

Gilead's Balm

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"Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" (Jer. 8:22).

Although these words were primarily addressed to Israel when they were in a state of spiritual decline, they must be given a much wider application than what they have in their original context. Since the gospel, the good news of God's Salvation, is by Christ's command to be preached to all men, and since all men are in the fatal grip of sin, this solemn question is, therefore, addressed to all. And although the question is addressed to all who come within the joyful sound of the gospel it is, on the other hand, personal to each one of us. In our relationship with God we stand accountable and alone, as if no creature existed within the universe but ourselves. Each of us shall at last have to stand before God to give an account of our deeds in this life whether they be good or evil. And the greatest sin which we can commit in this life is to neglect the great salvation and to ignore the Great Physician who alone can heal our souls. Let us look, briefly, at these words. We notice, first:

I. The Disease of Sin

Let us hear, first of all, what God Himself has to say about this disease. When we are stricken with sickness, it is not for us to say what the nature of our trouble is. It is for the physician to diagnose our sickness and, if that is possible, to prescribe a cure. Men may have their own views of sin, but if these deny or contradict what God says about it in His Word, they are to be rejected as false and spurious and of no importance at all. He who is our Creator is the One who knows all things. He has made a diagnosis of this disease, and if we are wise it is to His voice we listen. This subject, however, is so vast, so deep and terrible that we can only mention a few aspects of it.

The first thing that God says about this disease is that it is a **universal condition**. "All have sinned." "There is none righteous, no not one." Adam was the federal head of mankind, so that when he fell away from God we all fell and sinned in him and with him. And the loathsome disease which took possession of his nature extends to all men.

None of those who enter this world by ordinary generation has escaped this deadly plague. Its destructive power works in the hearts and lives of all men.

It is a disease which is also **co-extensive with the whole of our being**. There are those who say that although man has fallen a prey to sin he is still capable of doing good, and that there is still much in his nature which God accepts and recognises as good. While by human categories we classify men as “good” and “bad”, God, who knows the heart, pronounces us all without soundness or health. Before His eyes the heart of man is “desperately wicked” and, in the depth of its depravity, it is known only to Him. And when God speaks of the “heart” He means the whole of our nature and the whole bent and bias of our minds, our wills and of all our inward desires. We were “born in sin and shapen in iniquity”, and to our original sin we add actual transgressions which greatly aggravate our state and plight. The world in which we live is, for example, a pale reflection of the heart of man. From whence come the wars, the confusions, the lawlessness, the indescribable abominations which threaten our destruction in these days? They have their source in the human heart, and if the present process of degeneration continues one wonders how long can the Lord bear with us. The contaminating plague which as in other days — is in danger of destroying our world has its source in man’s sinful nature. And those to whom God has given a true insight into their own heart can only bow their heads in shame and helplessness and say, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” They say with another: “In me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing.”

**“For a disease that loathsome is
So fills my loins with pain.”**

There was a law in Israel which demanded that the leper should be excluded from society, and from all access to God’s house. Wherever this contagion was discovered he immediately became an outcast, till such a time as he found healing. And the greatest loss that man has suffered from sin is that **it has broken off his communion with God**. If, then, we are not delivered from this disease we shall be eternally separated from God and excluded from the bliss of Heaven. The moment this evil thing touched the beings of those angels “who kept not their first estate” they were banished into the outer darkness. The moment the devil’s breath touched the soul of man, and man, “left to the freedom of his own will”, yielded to Satan’s lie, he lost communion with God and was banished from paradise. On the great day which awaits us all the Judge on the Throne shall banish from His presence all who are undelivered from this plague. “Depart from me.” To use an illustration, if a person came to your door whom you knew to be carrying a deadly contagion you would not say to him: “Come in. You are welcome here. Sit down with my children. My home is yours.” No, you would wisely shun such a person and exclude such a danger from your home. And into God’s Home above nothing shall enter that “defileth or worketh abomination or maketh a lie.” The imperatives of Heaven cannot be by-passed. We must be renewed or healed in the inner man: washed in the blood of the Lamb, clothed in Emmanuel’s righteousness, and made sweet and pure through the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Heaven is not for the ungodly or for those who remain in the grip of this plague.

And for this disease there is no cure on earth. In the days of the prophet there were false preachers who minimised the evil of sin and who healed the wound of the daughter of Zion lightly, saying: "Peace, peace." And are we not familiar in these times with those who put soft deceptive pillows under the head of perishing sinners. Instead of exposing the evil of sin, they cover it up by making vague statements that all is well. There are also on the scene those who speak of sin as something which has its source in our external environment or in the example of our fellow men. But such superficial explanations are far removed from reality. All the evils which surface today before our eyes have, as we have said, their source in the human heart, and till the heart is changed by the Holy Spirit there is no hope for man.

This is a disease therefore which, without the help and power of God, **must end in total and eternal death.** "For the wages of sin is death." God warned man as to the consequence of sin. "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." This was not the threat of mere physical death. When man sinned, and God withdrew His presence from his soul, his soul pined away in utter death. "The soul that sinneth it shall die." And eternal death follows in the wake of spiritual death.

Not very long ago I met a man who was led to seek the Lord through the words which a minister used in one of his public prayers. "Lord," he said, "there are millions with Thee in glory who were born in sin and who lived in sin; but not one who died in sin." The words arrested this mans mind and brought him under spiritual concern which resulted in his conversion. O! that these words would arrest us all and lead us to seek the great salvation which Christ alone can give.

Perhaps the most terrible thing one could say about this disease is that it may be working within our beings without our having any awareness of it. The soul, while dead in trespass and sin, may lie on the lap of a fond delusion that all is well when all is ill. There are instances in the Bible of men and people who were moving toward eternal death while, at the same time, they thought their lives and works were perfect before God. The Pharisee who stood before God in the temple to pray had no awareness of his spiritual sickness. The Church at Laodicea looked upon herself as whole — with no need of the Physician. Sin is a drug. In the coma or dream of spiritual death, we think favourably of ourselves. In this state we think we are whole and that we therefore need not a physician. The man or woman who has no awareness of the plague of his or her own heart is, indeed, in a state of great danger. There is hope for those who know themselves to be sick, for they may be led to seek healing through Christ and His balm. Our prayer should be that God would awaken us out of the sleep of death lest we find ourselves at last in the dread place where sleep is unknown, and where sin shall rage for ever and ever within our beings.

But for all who believe what God says in His Word of our state by nature, and who have, in some measure, felt the plague of their own heart, there is:

II. A Physician and a Balm

The Physician of the soul is God Himself. "I am the Lord that healeth thee." He who created us in His own image, and who knows perfectly the nature and extent of our "hurt" is our Healer. He alone could provide "a balm", the healing virtues of which can never fail: "Who healeth all thy diseases". Whatever destructive inroads sin has made in our hearts and lives God can still restore us to full spiritual health. If, in the words of another, all the people of God are in this life in His hospital none ever dies there — or ever shall. They are all in His hand, each and all blessed with His loving and personal care. "The Lord will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing: "Thou wilt make all his bed in his sickness."

O! how we ought to admire and wonder at the condescension of God in all this. Are we not amazed that He who counts the numbers of the stars, and who gives them all their names, the Creator and the Sustainer of the great universe in which we live, should, in unspeakable love and tenderness, bind up all the wounds of His ailing people. He is ever beside all who are broken in their hearts and whose cry is, "Heal my soul, for I have sinned against thee." The pity of an earthly father toward his child is but a pale illustration of the pity which flows from the very heart of God towards poor ailing sinners who seek salvation at His hand.

It was this that constrained Him to enter our world in our nature. "He came to bind up the broken hearted." He took "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh". He took our sins and our sorrows, and although He is now exalted at God's right Hand He is still the true Physician of souls.

The Gospels are full of instances of His mercy, power, and grace as these were exercised in the salvation of those who had no help of man, and who in looking to their left hand and their right saw none who could save them. The bowed-down and broken woman who had spent her all on other physicians found, when in an act of faith she touched the hem of His garment, her terrible disease removed. She was made whole. Healing power had flowed from the Great Physician which consciously surged through her whole being. She was but one of many. She was but one of the great multitude which no man can number whom Christ shall present to Himself "without spot or wrinkle or any such thing". His healing is perfect healing. It is not something which gives temporary relief only to return again. No. It is radical. It is permanent. It is not the old creature patched up for a while. The man whom God heals is for ever a new creature in Christ. He is renewed in all his faculties and, in the moment of his regeneration, put in possession of eternal health. The Spirit of God, who is the author of regeneration, shall, by a work of sanctification, bring all the people of God to perfection. "They shall stand without fault before the Throne."

But how and where does the sinner particularly find healing? What is the balm which the Lord applies to his wounds? There are many opinions as to what, literally and exactly, the balm of Gilead was. In the opinion of many who have studied the historical setting of

this verse “the balm of Gilead” was the substance of a tree which grew in this region. The healing balsam flowed out of the tree after it was cut, and had virtues peculiar to itself. There were also physicians in Gilead skilled in the application of this balm. We know that these words are proverbial. They are also typical of the healing power of Christ both in His death and life.

There is no healing or salvation for the soul of man apart from the death of Christ. He is “the Tree of Life” who was, at the same time, “wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.” “By His stripes we are healed.” Before healing or life could come to man, Christ must endure the stroke of Divine Justice. When man sinned that sword stood between him and the tree of life, but now we are reconciled to God by the death of His Son. It is in beholding the Lamb of God — Christ crucified

— that the soul is saved and that we are given access to all the blessings of redemption. Those who were dying in the camp of Israel, through the sting of the fiery serpents which raged among them, found instant healing in looking to the serpent on the pole. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness even so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Where do you, dear friend, find healing for a wounded spirit and a guilty conscience? How did you enter into peace with God? Where did the oppressive burden of sin fall from your soul? Where, but at the Cross of Calvary and through the blood of sprinkling. His death is our balm. It is from the wounds of Christ, who is the Tree of Life, that the balsam of salvation flows.

It is through His death also that free and saving grace is bestowed on us. “By grace we are saved.” And the grace which saves is the grace which heals the soul. When Satan threw his darts into the soul of Paul, His great Physician in Heaven applied His balm to his wounded spirit. “My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” You recall how on the day of Atonement in Israel, when the high priest sprinkled the blood of the Covenant before the mercy seat, God’s glory which dwelt between the Cherubims did, in the words of the Psalm, shine forth. And when the sinner is reconciled to God through the death of His Son not only does grace reign in his heart but the first rays of the Sun of Righteousness shine into his soul. Christ, the Eternal Sun, rises on his soul with healing in His wings.

God’s Word also brings healing to the afflicted soul. “He sent His Word and healed them.” It was by His Word that He healed many while He was among us. He said to the Leper, “I will, be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy departed from him.” This is the universal testimony of true Christian experience. You may recall the day, when pining in the very shades of death, He passed by you and spoke a word to your soul. How dear and precious to your heart is that word which first brought healing and comfort to your spirit. It was as if God’s life-giving lips had touched your soul. “Say unto my soul, I am Thy salvation.” “The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” It is through the application of His promises by the Holy Spirit that the Lord heals and purifies the soul. “Sanctify them through the truth:

Thy Word is truth". But not till we reach that happy country "where the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick", shall all our hurts be fully recovered. Meantime, let us who know His name, continue instant in prayer that His balm may bring more and more comfort to our broken and contrite spirit till the day dawn and the day-star arise in our hearts.

It were well for us to observe where this balm is. Literally speaking, Gilead was not remote from the daughter of Zion or the people of Israel. It was within easy reach of all who sought a cure for their hurt. And spiritually the same is true. "The Word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thine heart; that is, the word of faith which we preach." We have the Word of God in our homes, and often in our hands. Parts of it we have even stored in our memory. But is it in our heart? Do we believe it? Do we receive Him who is present in His Word? Gilead, or the means of grace, is near — and yet, for those who do not believe, so far. Is not the same true of the Throne of Grace? "Draw nigh unto God, and He will draw nigh unto you." He is **waiting** to be gracious. You may kneel before God in the privacy of your own little room in your home and ask Him to save you. You may do it inwardly, even where you are at this moment, sitting and listening to the Word. You are without excuse. "The word is nigh thee." O! the deep and solemn tragedy of entering a lost eternity because we refuse to believe — because we refuse to come to Christ. Why should you be so unjust and unkind to your own soul as, by your neglect, to involve it in eternal deprivation, destruction and despair? That is what you are doing who do not avail yourselves of God's loving kindness. Just think of the consequences of your neglect in all their terror; but, is it not true that they cannot really bear thinking about.

Then there is:

III. The Great and Solemn Question: "Why then is the health of the daughter of my people not recovered?"

If this plague is so deadly, and if both the Physician and the balm are accessible and available, why then are we not healed? At the bar of this question each sinner may have his or her own excuse. One may say — "I have no awareness of this disease. I have no conviction that my state is such as you describe. Till this is given me I cannot do anything." But, as we have tried to show, it is not what you feel about it, but what God says about it, and what He wants you to do, that matters. One may be dying of a malignant disease without having any pain; but the absence of pain is no proof that all is well or that the disease is not doing its destructive work. Whatever our "feelings" may be, we are all, without Christ, in the grip of death.

There are others who may be in the hands of false physicians. We live, spiritually speaking, in the age of quacks and cults. All and each of these have their own spurious prescriptions and cures. Think, for example, of the millions who put themselves in the hands of a priest believing that he has the power to put away their sins, and to pave a way for them to Heaven. But, there is but one name under Heaven given among men

whereby we must be saved, even the name of Jesus. Pass **Him** by and you sink into woe.

Others there are who play fast and loose with time and privilege. Satan may agree with them that they need salvation, but he whispers, as in the case of the Rich Fool, that there are still “many years” and a bright long future awaiting them. There is always, he tells them, tomorrow, or the “more convenient time”. Alas, a lost eternity is a place of regrets. We carry our memory with us to the world of spirits. “Son, remember”, were the words which Abraham addressed to the rich man in torments. He had no thought of death when death came. Dear friend, redeem your time; and while Jesus of Nazareth is passing by in the loving overtures of the Gospel, lift up your voice and cry for salvation. Wilt **thou** be made whole? May Christ, the Physician, be precious to us all, and may the Balm of His grace, applied by the Holy Spirit to our souls, mark the beginnings of our everlasting joy.

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