

BALM IN GILEAD

Jeremiah 8.4–9.1; Isaiah 61.1ff.; Luke 4.13ff.

Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem,
look around and consider,
search through her squares.
If you can find but one person
who deals honestly and seeks the truth,
I will forgive this city (Jeremiah 5.1; NIV¹).

The prophet Jeremiah and the people are invited to undertake a search. The search is to find one person who is faithful to God's covenant, one who acts justly and seeks to do what is right. If that person can be found, then God will forgive the city (i.e., Jerusalem; cf. Genesis 18.23-32). But the search is useless, because the people are utterly and hopelessly wicked. In the final verses of chapter 6, Jeremiah still is searching for precious metal among the dross of Judah's population. Like a careful and expert metallurgist, God's prophet assesses the quality of the ore. God says to him, "I have appointed you an assayer and a tester of my people, that you may know and assay their way [i.e., their conduct]" (6.27). In his report back to God after completion of this task, Jeremiah replies, "All of them are stubbornly rebellious, going about as slanderers . . . [and] corrupt to a man [i.e., to the last man]" (6.28). "Not only did Jeremiah fail to find men of justice and truth, but when he tested the citizens of Jerusalem more closely he found that the truth of the matter was appalling. Breaches of the covenant were discovered on every hand. Rebellion, evil speaking, and corruption had altogether replaced justice and truth."²

¹New International Version (1984).

²J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, general editor, R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 266.

Comparing his assessment of the people to the ancient process of refining raw metal ore, the prophet writes:

The bellows puff, the fire is ready,
lead, copper, iron . . .
In vain does the refiner smelt them,
and the ore is not separated out (6.29).

On this occasion, when lead was placed in a crucible with silver ore and heated, the lead became oxidized and served as a flux to collect impurities. The bellows blew fiercely to give a very high temperature, but out of the heat came only lead, copper, and iron—no pure silver. The raw ore was so impure that the whole procedure failed. The alloys were not removed, and the silver (if there was any at all) was not recovered. The lesson was clear—Judah was thoroughly impure. Jeremiah’s prophetic fire had been unable to remove the impurities from Israel and unable to set free any pure silver. The men and women of Judah were too rebellious; they were too corrupt. So the final assessment is given: “Call them spurious [i.e., rejected] silver, because the Lord has rejected them” (6.30).

In light of Judah’s utter wickedness, the questions posed in chapter 8 of Jeremiah become significant. The question is raised—is it possible for a people to turn aside from their God and never repent? When people fall down, they usually get up again. “When men fall down, do they not get up? When a man turns away, does he not return?” (8.4; NIV). People in life learn from their mistakes. This seems to be a built-in, intuitive response in many situations. But of Israel, the prophet says, “Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding” (8.5; RSV³; “in continual apostasy,” NASB⁴). The indication is that the apostasy of Judah is permanent and

³Revised Standard Version (1946, 1952).

⁴New American Standard Bible (1971).

irreversible. “They cling to deceit; they refuse to return” (8.5). Jeremiah had listened closely, but no one uttered words of repentance for evil. No one expressed regret. No one asked, “What have I done?” (8.6). The people were in willful rebellion against God, so much so that, according to Jeremiah, “each man pursues his own course like a horse storming [i.e., charging, plunging] into battle” (8.6).

As it was, Israel did not know the law of the Lord. God had established a way of life for his people, but the people of Judah, unlike the birds of the heavens, were insensitive and unresponsive to that orderly way of life. The prophet says, “Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove, the swallow, and the thrush observe the time of their migration” (8.7). Even the birds, God’s little creatures, respond automatically to the orderly patterns (i.e., law) that God has placed in his created world. But such was not so in Israel. Oh yes, there were the claims, especially by the religious officials, about possessing the law of the Lord and, consequently, possessing wisdom (see 8.8). But this was only a sham, an external and ritualistic religion. The scribes had rejected the word of the Lord, and they taught the people the same. For all their so-called understanding of God’s ways, it did nothing for the way the people lived (see 8.9-10). What was the result? “The wickedness that was rampant was to be found in every class, from the least to the greatest, from the prophets to the priests. Greed characterized them all. The spiritual leaders, the prophets and the priests, practiced deceit—they fed the people empty assurances that all was well when the nation was sick.”⁵ They would cry peace, peace, when there was no peace, and they would dress up, or cover up, the wounds of the people, as if they were not so serious (see 8.11). “And were they ashamed of how they acted? Not at all, because

⁵Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 300.

they could feel no shame, and they did not know how to blush. It was the end. The question had been answered. Could people reach a stage of apostasy where they could never repent? Yes they could, and Judah had reached that point.”⁶ So with God’s visitation of judgment, they would fall among the fallen (see 8.12).

What would be the conclusion? Judah had become an unproductive vine, with no grapes, no figs, only withered leaves. Therefore, God would punish his own people with the foe from the north (i.e., Babylon). This would cause the people to say, “They have come to devour the land and everything in it, the city and all who live there” (8.16; NIV). The Babylonians would come upon Judah like “poisonous snakes, vipers that cannot be charmed” (see 8.17). Just like what happened to their ancestors in the wilderness of Sinai (see Numbers 21.6-9), there would be no deliverance.

This prospect of destruction for Israel caused passionate grief in Jeremiah over Jerusalem (8.18-22). Jeremiah was in anguish as he suffered with the people. He loved them; he loved Judah; he loved Jerusalem (cf. Jesus in Matthew 16.14; 23.37-39). He had been compelled by God to preach the prophetic word, a word of destruction. But he felt grief, as he was stricken by the thought of the destruction of God’s people. Jeremiah is sincere, and sincerity in proclaiming doom leads not to joy and rejoicing but to weeping and crying. Once again, we see the prophet in dialog with his God. He says:

Grief has overwhelmed me,
I am sick at heart.
Listen! hark! the cry of my daughter—my people
from a distant land.
“Is the Lord not in Zion?
Is her King no longer there?” (8.18-19).

⁶Ibid.

The prophet hears “the cry of my daughter—my people,” and the telling question is, “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?” And God answers, as if to say, “Yes, the Lord is in Zion. Yes, Israel’s king is there.” But, “why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?” (8.19). The cry of the people continues:

“The harvest is past,
the summer has ended,
and we are not saved” (8.20; NIV).

The harvest is the wheat harvest that lasted from April to June. If the wheat harvest failed, the people might look forward to summer fruits—grapes, figs, olives, etc. But if these summer fruits failed, famine faced the people. This saying—“the harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved”—seems to have been a popular proverb used in daily life when people encountered a hopeless situation from which no deliverance or escape seemed possible. Judah had passed up opportunity after opportunity to respond to God’s call for repentance to be delivered or saved. But the people had not repented, so there was no hope. There was no more opportunity for turning back to God. Because they had abandoned God, God had, in a sense, forsaken them, and all hope of deliverance was gone. The harvest was over, the summer was past, and they were not saved.

Again, Jeremiah’s passionate grief is revealed. He cries out:

I am broken because of the breaking of my daughter—my people;
I mourn; dismay has seized me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why is there no healing for their wound?⁷

⁷Literally, “why has no skin grown over their wound? (cf. the New English Bible, 1972).

Would that my head were water,
my eyes a fountain of tears,
that day and night I might weep
for the slain of my daughter-my people! (8.21–9.1).

Gilead was on the eastern side of the Jordan River and was famous (even in patriarchal times, see Genesis 37.25) for its healing balsams. The balm of Gilead evidently was one such healing ointment. On the physical level, healing was to be found. But Gilead's balm and the doctor's cure were not sufficient for the deep spiritual wounds of Judah. There would be no possible restitution of Judah's spiritual health while her spirit remained rebellious and unregenerate. This is because remedy and healing, then as now, is only for those who have a broken and contrite spirit. In Isaiah 61.1-4, the prophet says:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations (NRSV⁸).

⁸New Revised Standard Version (1989).

There is a balm in Gilead for the soul that is sick of sin. And Israel was healed retrospectively in the person of her Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus came to his hometown of Nazareth after his baptism and temptation, the gospel of Luke tells us:

He went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4.16-19; NRSV).

After Jesus rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the synagogue leader, he sat down and began to explain this passage from Isaiah to those who had gathered for the synagogue service. And Luke tells us that “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” But Luke sums up in one sentence the essence of the message of Jesus on that occasion: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4.21; NRSV). Jesus is the one anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to bring good news to the poor. Jesus is the one sent by God to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. And it is Jesus who proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor. Yes, there is a balm in Gilead.