***IS THERE A BALM IN GILEAD?***

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Texts: Jeremiah 8:18-9:3 and I Timothy 2:1-4

“*My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick*.” Those might be the words of some forlorn Redskin fan (or Steeler fan of late) after another dispiriting loss, but they are also the words of the prophet Jeremiah spoken, not in some lament about his own pain and suffering, but in anticipation of the destruction God will bring upon the people of Israel. How bad will it be?

*Death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this*

*evil family of [the kings of Judah]…says the Lord. (8:3)*

*The snorting of horses is heard from Dan; at the sound of the*

*neighing of their stallions the whole land quakes. They come and devour the land and all that fills it, the city and those who live in it, says the Lord. (8:16)*

*See, I am letting snakes loose among you, adders that cannot be*

*charmed, and they shall bite you, says the Lord. (8:17)*

*We look for peace, but find no good, for a time of healing, but there is*

*terror instead, (8:15) say the people.*

That’s how bad it is going to be! The future of Israel is bleak – suffering, death, and destruction are lurking just over the hill. So, the prophet laments, and pours out his heart with a fountain of tears, but he does not weep alone.

You might expect the people to weep with him, but it is not their grief that echoes from the hills. They continue on their merry, sinful way, ignoring Jeremiah’s pleas to repent and doing whatever sinful thing they want to do without regard for the dire consequences. No, the tears shed with Jeremiah are not the people’s tears; they are the tears of God. Words of the prophet are words of the Lord, and the words of the prophet’s lament are the words of the Lord’s lament. God takes no joy in the suffering of Israel; God weeps for the destruction to come. It is the ache of a parent disciplining a child, the ache of a parent who loves the child more than the child knows, the ache of a parent who loves the child enough to discipline her when she goes astray. *This will hurt me even more than it will hurt you*, says the Lord.

In the eyes of God, Judah had gone far astray. The people had turned away from the Lord and turned toward other gods who were no gods. Justice and love were nowhere to be found; greed and evil abounded.

*From the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely. They acted shamefully, yet they were not ashamed; they did not know how to blush, says the Lord*. (Jer. 8:10-11)

In their prosperity the people had forgotten the God who had delivered them from Egyptian bondage, the God who had brought them safely into the Promised Land, the God who sustained them in the wilderness, the God who had patiently and lovingly persevered with them despite their unfaithfulness, idolatry, and chronic whining. Divine patience had worn thin, but divine love never flagged. So, while the armies of destruction massed at Judah’s borders, God wept.

How can that be? How can it be that God weeps for God’s people yet allows them to suffer? Why does God not end all suffering, sweep away all pain, and in so doing ease God’s own suffering and pain? In a speech at JMU some years ago South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu recited a litany of places in the world in which suffering and conflict are rampant, and then said softly: “*God, we know you are in charge. So, why don’t you make it a little more obvious?*” Indeed, why does God not take control and remake the world the way the world is supposed to be?

In his book *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be* Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. recalls a scene in the film *Grand Canyon*. An attorney trying to get out of a traffic jam takes an unfamiliar route that draws him deeper and deeper into neighborhoods he doesn’t want to be in; then his expensive car stalls. He calls a tow truck, but before it arrives five young street toughs arrive and begin to threaten him. Just as the situation reaches a critical point the tow truck shows up, and the driver intervenes. As he begins to hook up the attorney’s car, the local hoods protest angrily; the driver is ruining their sport with this rich man. The driver takes aside the leader of the group and says:

*Man, the world ain’t supposed to work like this. Maybe you don’t know that, but this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be able to do my job without askin’ you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin’ him off. Everything’s supposed to be different than what it is here.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

Everything is supposed to be different than what it is here – isn’t that our issue with God? If God is in control, then there shouldn’t be disease or famine or hurricanes that wipe out entire islands. The planet wouldn’t be warming dangerously, and cancer would be cured. Neighbors would love one another; brothers and sisters would live together in harmony. Sermons would be short, and all that we do would glorify God. If God were really in control, all would be right with the world! Yet, the reality is very different, so the world asks with the people of Israel, “Where is God in all this? Does the Lord not care? Is there no balm in Gilead to make this wounded world whole?” Or is our world just too wounded to be healed by God?

If anyone had a right to ask that question it might be African-American slaves. Yet, it is their spirituals that speak a word of hope into a world of dire pain, their spirituals that sustained them and continue to sustain us in our wounded world. They dared to sing:

*There* ***is*** *a balm in Gilead that makes the wounded whole.*

*There* ***is*** *a balm in Gilead to heal the sinsick soul.*

In the midst of their suffering they sang words that denied that the world is **ever** too wounded to be healed by God. There is a balm that can heal, a spirit to revive the soul, and a Christ who died for all. There is indeed a balm for the world’s pain – that is the Christian’s hope. “*Hope, in the black spirituals, is not a denial of history,*” writes James Cone. “*Black hope accepts history, but believes that the historical is in motion, moving toward a divine fulfillment.*”[[2]](#endnote-2) The fulfillment of history and the healing of the world’s wounds lie in the hands of God. Those who sang those songs knew things were not the way they were supposed to be, but they believed in a God who would bring healing to the world and set things aright one fine day. The balm in Gilead is held in the nail-scarred hands of a God who knows what it is to suffer, a God who grieves with us even as God works to save us.

“Love, not time, heals all wounds,” writes Andy Rooney. It is the love of God that will heal the wounds of the world. It is that love we clutch onto in our prayers, love that assures us not only that God hears our prayers but that God also feels our pain. On the cross Christ not only experienced the pain of the world, but also offered his life to save it. His life is the balm that heals our wounds and gives us hope with which to face the challenges of this world that is not the way it is supposed to be – yet! It is love that beckons us to bend our hearts, our pride, perhaps even our knees to pray to the God whose love will never forsake us. “First of all,” writes Paul, “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone (and I think that means ***everyone***)…so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life.” Imagine that – praying for your friends, your family, and your foes; praying for the politicians you support and those you detest; praying for everyone! Why? In order to lead a quiet and peaceable life, writes Paul. It is that life we long for – a quiet peaceable life freed from the violent, discordant wounds of the world. That life begins with prayer, for it begins with God. As the words of the 19th century Irish poet bid us:

*Come, ye disconsolate, where e’er ye languish,*

*Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.*

*Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish;*

*Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.*[[3]](#endnote-3)

Or as Martina McBride suggests in a more contemporary country song:

*God is great, but sometimes life aint good*

*And when I pray*

*It doesn’t always turn out like I think it should*

*But I do it anyway,*

*I do it anyway.*

The world is not the way it’s supposed to be – sometimes life isn’t good and sometimes it is pretty bad and sometimes it is just plain awful. Our prayers aren’t always answered the way we think they should be, but we pray anyway. We hope anyway. We love anyway. We trust anyway. For, our God is a good God, a great God, a healing God, an awesome God who weeps for us and with us, a God who saves the world. As Biblical Scholar N.T. Wright notes:

*God the creator will not always save us* ***from*** *these dark forces, but [God] will save us* ***in*** *them, being with us in the darkness and promising us, always promising us, that the new creation begun at Easter will one day be complete, and then there will be full healing, full understanding, full reconciliation, full consolation.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

There is indeed a balm in Gilead that makes the wounded whole; it is the balm of Christ who came to heal the broken-hearted, to cleanse the sinsick soul, to make the wounded whole. We who are wounded, no matter how wounded – we who are sick, no matter how sick – we who are discouraged, no matter how discouraged – this world that is broken, no matter how broken – will be healed, will be mended, will be made whole, says the Lord! Amen

1. Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1995, p.7 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*, Linda Jo H. McKim, Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 1993, p.394 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Come, Ye Disconsolate*, Thomas Moore, 1816 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Scripture*, HarperOne:2014, p.127 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)