

## 1 Is there a Balm in Gilead?

- Why must good medicine be bitter?

## 2 Jeremiah 8:18–9:1

- O my Comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me.
- Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away: “Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?” “Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?”
- “The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.”
- Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?

## 3 The Balm of Gilead

- The Balm of Gilead was originally a healing compound made from the resinous gum of a bush which grew plentifully in the area of Gilead.
- This salve has anti-inflammatory, antibiotic/antiseptic and pain relieving qualities, and has been effectively used to treat abrasions, minor burns, frostbite and to ease the pain of sore muscles and joints.
- It is also known as a traditional skin cancer remedy.

## 4 Bitter Medicine

- While the Balm of Gilead is a nice, pleasant, sweet-smelling balm, it is not going to be enough to heal Judah’s disease.
- Unfortunately, they are going to need to swallow some bitter medicine first.
- And as we all known, the nastier the medicine tastes, the better it is for you.

## 5 The Good Old Days

- Many of us baby boomers remember when moms would . . .
  - shove Castor Oil down our throats, or
  - put VICKS Vapor Rub on our chest to open up clogged lungs or sinuses, or
  - make us drink cough medicine that tasted like a cherry shot from hell.

## 6 Bitter is Better!

- What we didn't realize then was that mom's fondness for bad medicine was actually a reflection of the way nature seems to work.
- Sometimes it's the most bitter stuff that produces the better medicine that can actually benefit our bodies and our souls.

## 7 Bag Balm

- How many know what Bag Balm is?
- Bag Balm was originally created to soothe irritation on dairy cows from milking.

- However, it is also marketed for humans and can be found in drug stores, ski resorts, online vendors, needle-work stores, and of course farm and feed stores.

## 8 Duct Tape of Medicine

- Basically, Bag Balm is the duct tape of medicine.
- Its uses are many, for example squeaky bed springs, psoriasis, dry facial skin, cracked fingers, burns, zits, diaper rash, saddle sores, sunburn, pruned trees, rifles, shell casings, bed sores and radiation burns.

## 9 More Than a Balm

- Unfortunately, neither the “balm in Gilead” or “Bag Balm” would be enough to cure Israel’s needs.
- They didn’t need some sweet smelling or soothing ointment.
- They were going to need to swallow a “bitter pill” before the people could be well and truly healed.

## 10 Serious Condition

- But serious illness calls for serious remedies. The disease in Judah had gone deep into the fabric of the nation. Jeremiah describes the symptoms:
  - The people acted shamefully and committed "abominations" and yet had no shame (8:12).
  - They deceived their neighbors, spoke lies instead of truth, and sinned without repenting (9:4-5).
  - They oppressed the weak and refused to know the Lord (9:6).
  - All of them had "turned to their own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle" (8:6).
  - They had given their worship to false idols and had become less and less the image of God and the people of God they were called to be.
  - Instead of following God, they had become adulterers and "a band of traitors" (9:2).

## 11 Sin, a Terminal Disease

- Through Jeremiah, then, God tells the people that the cure for their disease is going to involve some very bad medicine -- the bitter before the better.
- The bitter would come in the form of foreign invasion by the Babylonians, whose warhorses were already to be heard "snorting" from the northern area of Dan and whose hooves would make the whole land quake.
- The invaders were coming to "devour the land and all that fills it, the city and those who live in it" (8:16).
- They would be like those snakes that came upon the ancient Israelites in the desert because of their sin -- snakes that bite and cannot be charmed (8:17; see also Numbers 21:1-9).

## 12 Sin, a Terminal Disease

- God's judgment is a bitter pill to swallow, but Jeremiah tells us, like many of the biblical writers, that sin is a pretty serious disease, one that is always terminal.
- The cure isn't going to go down easy, even though many people of faith, then and now, hoped it would.
- God had rescued the people of Judah before when the Assyrians had threatened, so the people expected God would do it again despite their persistent sin.

### 13 Sin, a Terminal Disease

- To put it in Bonhoeffer's words,
  - they seemed to have been expecting a kind of "cheap grace" that would bail them out of their predicament with cures that were more likely to be found on the candy shelf than in the pharmacy.
- Many people of faith today are uncomfortable with God's judgment . . .
  - it sounds so draconian,
  - like the old cures of leeches and bloodletting,
  - instead of a sweet, little taste of grace that we hope will keep us going in spite of our sin.

### 14 God's Reality Check

- But God knows that the only real cure for the disease of sin is a heavy dose of reality, a remedy that actually attacks the problem.
- Like a parent who doesn't want to give her kid another dose of that nasty stuff that even goats wouldn't touch, God grieves and so do those like Jeremiah who speak for him (8:21; 9:1).
- And yet, God knows that judgment and grace are both key ingredients to real healing for the sin-sick soul.
- So, how do we receive the bad medicine of judgment that results in the healing of grace?

### 15 God Disciplines

- A major dose of reality for us Christians is that God disciplines those he loves.
- As it says in the New Testament, In your struggle against sin, . . . "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." (Heb 12:4-6 NIV)
- In fact, God disciplines all those who are in Christ. If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. (Heb 12:8 NIV)

### 16 Our usual Response

- However, the sad fact is that when God is disciplining us, (so that we may consider our ways), we often . . .
  - Complain . . . ,
  - Point fingers . . . ,
  - Get in a prayer line . . . ,
  - Blame the devil . . . , or
  - Blame God . . .
- The fact is . . . No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:11 NIV)

## 17 Responding to God's Discipline

- Because God loves us, he will not allow certain destructive patterns in our lives to continue without divine correction.
- The purpose is to train us in personal holiness and godliness. As the Scripture says, Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. (Heb 12:10 NIV)
- Unfortunately, some Christians equate the word discipline with punishment. Yes God punishes rebels, but he disciplines those he loves so that they'll be even better.
- Discipline by our heavenly Father is corrective, not punitive. He uses trials and circumstances to get our attention, so that we may consider our ways, and turn from dysfunctional attitudes and practices.
- Instead of losing heart or fight the process and be stubborn, we should cooperate with God and keep our eyes on the promised harvest of righteousness and peace.

## 18 God uses Hardships

- While not all hardships are the result of some sin in our lives, God nevertheless allows us to experience them, so that we are motivated to press in to God, purify our lives, and grow in faith.
- If life was just a bowl of cherries, we would probably become spiritually lazy and may even stop serving God.
- So if God is using trouble and hardships to get our attention, why do we still blame \_\_\_\_\_?
- When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him. (Prov 16:7 NIV)

## 19 The Promise of Peace

- However, let us not be deceived. We will never be free from the hardships of life.
- While we may never have bliss, we can still have God's peace.

- Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27 NIV)
- When we consider our ways and cooperate with what the Holy Spirit is showing us about ourselves, what is the promise?
- A problem free life right?
- No, it is a harvest of righteousness and peace.

## 20 The Benefit of Troubles

- Sometimes the best medicine is not that which tastes the sweetest, but is bitter and even nasty.
- However, we must not . . . lose heart. . . . For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory. (2 Cor 4:16–17 NIV)
- Why? Because as we allow our hardships to motivate us to consider our ways, we put ourselves in a very good position to grow and be strong in our faith.
- But what would happen, if we say to ourselves, the problem is not me, I'm fine, it's everyone else that has issues?
- Where in the Bible does stubborn and stiff-necked people prosper?
- Wouldn't that in and of itself be a sign that something is wrong and that we might have pride and arrogance in our life?

## 21 Healing is Often Painful

- To be healed of compromise or spiritual mediocracy may mean that we have to give up habits and practices to which we have become very accustomed.
- Giving up that habit, reconciling that relationship, laying aside that grudge, or seeing ourselves as we truly are—can be very painful in the short-term.
- God's discipline is painful because it convicts us of those places in our lives where we have become broken and sick because of our choices.
- God's grace can be equally painful because it invites us to do something about it.

## 22 Make Level Paths

- We all want a good and carefree life.
- But the reality is there are many things in life that can make us sick in heart. In fact, troubles and hardships have the potential to disable, scar, and cripple us, if we're not careful.
- That is why, if we want to be made whole we may need to take our medicine—even though it tastes horrible.
- As the writer in Hebrews says, Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. (Heb 12:12–13 NIV)
- Spiritual growth and healing is found in cooperating with what the Holy Spirit wants to do in our lives. God uses trouble and hardship to get our attention.

- How many more “bitter pills” does God need to give us before we will listen?