

The Balm in Gilead

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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
“Is there no balm in Gilead?”

Movement 1 – Our Sorrows and Our Grief

Life can be a mixture of sadness and sorrow. Life can be seen as a moving from one hardship to another. Life can be a mixture of sadness and sorrow.

If you were to ask a prophet, almost any prophet to describe their life they may very well make such a statement. Ezekiel lived a life of persecution, he was a social pariah, and preached an offsetting message of doom and gloom to the people. He did not live an easy life. Hosea took a prostitute for his wife, subjected his children to bizarre names, and called on Israel and Judah to return to the Lord in their hearts and their lives. It was not an easy life. Elisha was chased by Jezebel, branded a criminal and ran to the desert alone and ready to die out of frustration and sorrow due to his hardships. He did not live and easy life. The life of the prophet was a mixture of sadness and sorrow. Yet even with this litany of hardships and struggles, one prophet stands out. One prophet rises to the top of all the others when reciting the list of difficulties, of persecutions and of sorrow, Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet who was betrayed by his family, who was imprisoned, who was persecuted and who struggled to have his message heard. Jeremiah preached and lived during the downfall of Judah. He watched his beloved homeland overrun by foreign invaders, and as if to add insult to injury, it was just what he predicted would happen. Jeremiah is known as a sorrowful, sad prophet. While it may or may not be accurate, Jeremiah is credited as the author of the book of Lamentations; a book of hardship, sorrow, and sadness. Regardless who the author may or may not be, Lamentations is a window into the pathos of Jeremiah’s life. Jeremiah knew about sorrow, about suffering and struggle. Jeremiah’s life was a mixture of sadness and sorrow.

Maybe you know someone who is like Jeremiah. Maybe you know someone who always seems to be struggling in their life, who seems to be having difficulties in their life and who can’t seem to find a ray of sun in their day. Someone like Eeyore from the *Winnie the Pooh* stories. This is someone who once said, “When stuck in the river, it is best to dive and swim to the bank yourself before someone drops a large stone on your chest in an attempt to hoosh you there.” (from *Eeyore’s Gloomy Little Instruction Book*). Or in one interchange with the always positive Pooh when Pooh said, “Good morning, Eeyore,”

“Good morning, Pooh Bear,” said Eeyore gloomily. “If it is a good morning, which I doubt,” said he.

“Why, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing, Pooh Bear, nothing. We can’t all, and some of us don’t. That’s all there is to it.

“Can’t all what?” said Pooh, rubbing his nose.

“Gaiety. Song-and-dance. Here we go round the mulberry bush.”

This is a person who lives a life of sorrow and suffering. This is a person who knows what I mean when I say that life is a mixture of sadness and sorrow.

We may not have that same degree of pessimism, we may not have that same degree of sorrow, but when you truly look at your life, there are times when you can name and claim the sorrow and the suffering. When you look at your life you can see and you can name the hardships that you have endured, and that maybe you are continuing to endure. The time you lost your job, and struggled to make ends meet. The time when someone in your family, someone close to you, near and dear to you died and you were overcome with grief. The time when you watched your loved one struggling with an illness and there was nothing you could do. The time when as a church you struggled, you felt that you were torn and you found it difficult to worship. We all struggle with these times. We are wrestle with these times. We move into those times when we view life through a looking glass of tears and find it difficult to see clearly. We have all had that time when all we know in our life was grief. We all can, to a degree, agree with the statement that life is a mixture of sadness and sorrow. When we could find ourselves:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,...
And we say to the specter of our sorrow and despair looking for some hope:
'Prophet!' said I, 'thing of evil! – prophet still, if bird or devil! –
Whether tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted –
On this home by horror haunted – tell me truly, I implore –
Is there – is there balm in Gilead! – tell me – tell me, I implore!'

(from Poe, *The Raven*)

We find ourselves saying and shouting for some hope, for some respite, for some balm to heal our sorrow and our grief. And there are those times when life answers with the raven, “nevermore.” We find ourselves struggling, starving, seeking some hope and some peace. We move in and out of these moments of sorrow and sadness. We find our own lives to be a mixture of sadness and sorrow.

Movement 2 – The Happy Christian Response

Yet as Christians, are we not supposed to always be happy? As Christians, are we not to always have a joy in our hearts and in the Lord? We all have those times of sorrow and grief. We all have those times of suffering and sadness, but how are we supposed to respond? What is the proper response, what is the response that would honor the Lord in the midst of our grief and sorrow? What is the Christian response to grief?

When Jeremiah prophesied, he was not the only one standing on the wall. When Jeremiah was preaching and proclaiming his message of destruction, he was not the only one calling the people to listen. There were other prophets. There were other ones who claimed to be messengers of the Lord. Some may have agreed with Jeremiah, but others may have strongly disagreed. Maybe there was a prophet who would stand on the wall and say, “everything would be fine.” As the armies surrounded the city, as the threat of violence and destruction loomed, there were prophets who would proclaim that God would deliver them, and that they should have a light and happy heart and trust in the Lord. These were prophets of hope and warmth. We have such prophets today. We have those who preach a message of hope and warmth. The televangelists of today often preach a message of hope and warmth. We could take a televangelist of today and transplant him or her to the time of Jeremiah and he or she would be very comfortable

next to the other prophets of hope and warmth. The televangelists of today preach to the poor that they should give what they have and trust in the Lord with a happy heart. The televangelists of today preach to the sick to trust in the Lord and believe all will be well. The televangelists of today go to the downhearted and call them to have a happy heart because they have a place in heaven. Such a message would be readily heard and received in Judah, with the prophets of warmth and light, standing next to Jeremiah and to call the people to have a happy, a light heart because all will be well.

But shouldn't we have that attitude? Shouldn't we say, have a happy heart and trust in the Lord. Shouldn't we say to the person recently unemployed to take cheer and trust that all will be well with the Lord? Shouldn't we say to the person who is recently grieving to take heart and be of good cheer because we will all be united in heaven? Shouldn't we say to the struggling church to take heart and be of good cheer because if we just trust in God all will be made right? As Christians we have a message that God takes care of us, that God is with us, and that we just need to trust in God. So shouldn't such a message make us happy Christians all the time? We are told that we have "Victory in Jesus," so shouldn't we offer praise to the Lord? Even in the moments of despair, even in the moments of difficulties, and even in the moments of struggle we should keep a smile on our face because we believe that all will be made right with the Lord.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote that, "the doctrines of Jesus are simple, and tend all to the happiness of man [sic]." The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, "Christianity is indeed the only sure way to happiness." The evangelist Billy Sunday said, "If you have no joy, there's a leak in your Christianity somewhere." Perhaps we are indeed called to have a light heart, to be full of joy and cheer. When we struggle we should remind ourselves that God must be teaching us a lesson, and it will all be for something worthwhile. When tragedy occurs we must remember that God is in charge of everything and that there must be a good reason. Maybe as Christians we should strive to wear the bright yellow smiling face all the time so that we can witness the good works of the Lord.

We could be like the mother, Kitty on the television program, *That 70s Show*. She is someone who is always smiling, is always laughing, and is always looking to make things go well. Even when that laughter takes on a nervous twang and barely covers up the anxiety that Kitty is feeling, she is still making an effort to keep a happy face. Perhaps we should do the same. Maybe as Christians, even in the face of hardships, we are to respond with the happy, the joyful, the bubbly image of Christianity that we are supposed to have. Don't bring others down. Don't show your weakness, your sadness, and your fears but only trust in the Lord. Trust in the Lord and praise, and celebrate and offer thanks. Perhaps this is the response to sorrow that we all are called to have.

Movement 3 – Reality and Despair

Yet there are times when our tears overwhelm us. There are times when our tears fall and cannot be stopped. There are times when the grief cuts deeper than our faith and we feel and live the hurt. There are times when our tears overwhelm us.

We try to keep our faith, and our cheer, and a light, joyful heart, but when one child is very ill, and another child breaks his arm, and another is having trouble in school, we begin to feel ourselves pulled down. When one parent dies, and then, just a month later the other parent dies, it is difficult to keep a sense of joy in our lives. When you

have health issues compound upon health issues and they never seem to end it is difficult to keep hoping. There are times with our tears, our difficulties, and our sorrow overwhelms us. There are times when we just cannot reach deep enough to grab onto the joy that we are to have in Christ. There are times when we just cannot muster the strength to smile. There are times when we do not have the joy.

These may be times when we can truly relate to Job. Job was a faithful and righteous person. He was someone who prayed and believed in God. Yet calamity after calamity fell upon him and his house. Sorrow and suffering surrounded him and he fell into a feeling of self-pity. After he lost his belongings, his family and his health, Job sat in mourning and grief for days until he finally opened his mouth and said,

“Let the day perish on which I was born,
And the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived.’
Let that day be darkness!

His sorrow, his suffering was so great that Job cursed the day he was born. He could not find hope. He could not find joy, for the reality of his despair was overwhelming.

Imagine that in Judah, in this country that was devastated with war, death and destruction was a widow who heard the televangelists, hope and warmth prophets preaching. This was a widow who lost her husband and her older sons in battle along with her father and her brothers. Now she was alone to take care of her younger children, in a society that did not give much to women by the way of rights and opportunities. The situation seemed, and in many ways was hopeless. She hears the message of the hope and warmth prophets and tries to follow their calling. Imagine her praying and asking God for help, trying to trust God would take care of her, but realizing the reality that she did not have enough bread for everyone that evening. Imagine her worshiping God, praising God, but at the same time realizing the reality of her despair that she did not know where to go to help out her children. Imagine her walking past the prophets of prosperity, the prophets of good news and finding that she could not find the joy and the hope that she was called to have. Imagine her, in the isolation of her own despair crying out, “I want to praise you Lord, but I have not the strength to praise.” The reality of the despair went to deep for her to have joy.

The playwright Eugene Ionesco once said, “No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute. It is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa.” Human sadness is a reality, and there are times when we cannot muster the hope and joy we desire to have in our faith to overcome our struggles.

What do we do when the grief is too much? Do we go to the Lord with a sense of shame because we cannot be the happy Christians that we feel pulled to be? Do we repent the weakness of our faith? Do we hide our grief hoping that we can learn to limp with our wounds? When the grief is so great, how do we praise, for there are times when the wave of sorrow crashes over us and our tears overwhelm us and drown out our hope and our warmth. How do we, as Christians, respond to such grief?

Movement 4 – Biblical Despair

In the story of our faith, we have the calling and the examples to let our tears fall. We have a precedent to let our tears fall, to shout out our grief, and to speak our despair. It is a part of our story to let our tears fall.

Jeremiah is crying out his grief with no room for hope. He is shouting that his joy is gone, his grief is upon him and his heart is sick. He declares that the Lord is gone, that the summer is over, and the balm, the healing ointment from Gilead is not present for the people of Judah. Jeremiah cries for more tears than he can offer. He cries for more grief than he has to bear. Jeremiah is crying out his grief with no room for hope. There is no holding back for Jeremiah, but a raw lament for the suffering of his people.

Look at that closely, and notice that lack of hope, the lack of joy. Look closely and taste the raw grief that is shared. Jeremiah, the prophet, the one who speaks for the Lord, speaks a word of powerful grief with no warmth and no hope. We have a precedent of this true, raw and real grief.

This is not the only place in scripture where we find such raw grief. Read Psalm 137 and read of a raw, bitter, and deep grief of the people taken to Babylon. The people who were taken into exile could not articulate hope by the waters of Babylon. They could not sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land but only weep and weep by the moving waters, by the willows yearning to return home and to be free.

Read in 2 Samuel 18 of David's grief when he heard that his son Absalom was slain. Absalom was persecuting David, was leading a revolt against David, and yet David wept at the news of Absalom's death. As the text states, David, "was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!'" There is no room for hope in such a statement of grief. There is no joy, no word of thanks that the political unrest would now be quelled. Only tears, raw and real. We have a precedent for our tears.

Jesus even calls the women weeping for him as he walked toward the cross to weep for Jerusalem. He did not call the women to have hope or to be in good cheer, but to weep and to cry for Jerusalem. He affirmed their grief and their sorrow and encouraged more. There is a precedent for our tears.

We have a holy, sacred trail of tears to follow. Perhaps the pinnacle of our biblical tears is found with Christ on the cross crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These are words that speak of pathos, of sorrow, and of suffering. The moment when Christ is hanging on the cross, when the women are weeping at his feet, and when it seems all is lost is a moment that is appropriate to weep. Christ does not offer hope, thanksgiving or any joy. Our story from the bible is one of joy but also one of tears, of sorrow and of weeping. We have the example, the precedent, the path of grief before us. It is a part of our story and our faith to let our tears fall.

Movement 5 – Falling into the Tears of the Lord

Let your tears fall and let them fall into the hands of the Lord. Walk that path that is set before you. Join in with Job, with Jeremiah, with David, and with Christ is sharing your raw and honest grief. Speak your prayer with the honesty that we read in the scriptures. Say to the Lord, "is there no balm in my life? Is there no balm in Gilead?" Say to the Lord the words of the psalm shouting, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Say to the Lord, I hurt, I weep and my grief is deep.

Jeremiah is in a state of despair. He is looking at his people, people who have rejected the Lord, and his heart breaks for them. He is looking at his people, the ones he loves, the one he yearns to see happy and in God's favor and speaks his grief. Jeremiah is

being honest with his grief, and it is a grief that is shared with the Lord. In that sharing, in that pain and grief, Jeremiah's experience is made holy and sacred with the Lord.

Think of the mother I described earlier. She goes to pray, and for a moment, just a moment she does not look to force or fake a sense of hope or joy. For a moment she lets her tears fall, she lets her heart break, and she opens herself up to the presence of the Lord. She does not say in her prayer, "Lord it is hard, but I know with you all will be made right." All she says is, "Lord it is hard," and she weeps. And this is a prayer that can be sanctified by the Lord.

Whatever rope you are holding onto, whatever aspect of security, of strength, of surface joy you may be grasping onto, let go. Let go of the rope you are holding onto, and let your tears fall. Let go of the rock you are trying hard to grasp and the waves of your sorrow threatens to pull you in, and allow the currents to pull you. Let your tears fall into the hands of the Lord. Let your grief wail, let your heart break, and let them be held by the Lord.

Speak the honest prayer. Say that you can't see any hope. Say that it isn't fair. Say that you are angry. Say that you want things to change. Say the honest prayer, and you are opening yourself to the presence of the Lord. For when we are closed and when we are not honest we are not inviting God into our lives, we are only saying what we think needs to be said. But when we are open and honest we are sharing our lives with God, and invite God into our own. When I work with grieving individuals, I can always see the change when they open themselves. Sometimes they put on the strong and happy face, but you can see their pain. God is not active in their life because they are not being honest with God. Yet that moment when the tears fall, when they question why, when they are honest with their grief you can see the relief, the hope, and the presence of the Lord. They have opened their lives and are open to the Lord. Things may not change. Your struggles may still be a real part of your life, but now you are reminded that you do not walk with them alone. By sharing your grief, you make it God's as much as your own, and you will not walk alone. Let your tears fall, and let them fall into the hands of the Lord.

Movement 6 – The Balm in Gilead

And then look for the hope of the cross. Remember the hope of the cross. If you are in a place of sorrow, then you may not be ready to grab that hope, but it is always there, waiting for you. If you are in a place of grief, then the hope may not yet sit in your heart, but in time it will. Remember that God came and walked amongst us. Remember that he taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves. He taught us to love our enemies, to reach out to the outcaste, to live a life of peace and mercy. He taught us that God favors the least of the world but also continues to reach out to the greatest. He taught us a way to walk that is right with God. Remember the story of Jesus, who came to bring us all into a relationship with the Lord. Remember the despair in that story. The despair that the people turned on Christ, were afraid of Christ and condemned Christ to death. Remember the despair that Christ was mocked, was beaten, was ridiculed and condemned a criminal. He was led up the hill, wounded and broken. He was nailed to the cross and raised for all to see, to see his suffering, his agony and his pain. He was rejected, condemned, and left to die by the world. Remember that despair, that agony and that sadness of Christ on the cross. As your tears fall remember the tears of our Lord, suffering and struggling on the cross.

Yet remember that the story does not stop there. Our grief does not end there. They took his body, they buried his body and left him for dead, gone, and hope lost. Yet that was not the end. Three days later and hope triumphed. Three days later, glory reigned. Three days later and life overcame death. Christ rose. There is hope, we can have that hope, we can have that life. When it seemed that all was lost, as Martin Luther King once said that the Lord made a way out of no way. The Lord can make the crooked ways straight, the Lord can make the valleys level and the mountains low. The Lord can show a way through the despair, through the grief and through the loss of our lives.

Let your tears fall, but never let go of the Lord. Let your grief be shouted, but never stop sharing with the Lord. Let your wounds show, but do not keep them from the Lord. Stay to the Lord, the Lord of the cross and you will realize that there is a balm in Gilead. There is a hope, there is a peace, there is a life because of Christ. There is a balm to heal our wounds, to dry our tears and to heal the sin-sick soul. There is a balm in Gilead that offers us comfort, hope, and light even in the darkest light.

There is a balm!

There is a balm!

There is a balm!

AMEN