

“There is a Balm in Gilead”

“The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved” (Jeremiah 8:20) ¹

“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?”

Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?” (Jeremiah 8:22).

Responsive Reading, “Hope”

Our theme for the second Sunday of Black History Month is the Black Spiritual, “There is a Balm in Gilead.” As you know from what we’ve sung earlier, the words to the song go like this:

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work’s in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

If you can’t preach like Peter, if you can’t pray like Paul,
Just tell the love of Jesus, and say He died for all.

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;

*There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*²

The idea for this spiritual comes from Jeremiah 8:20-22, as the prophet laments the coming destruction of his nation: “*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?***”

As you probably know, while the word “balm” can have several meanings, it is most often used to refer to an ointment that soothes and heals damaged skin. Perhaps the best-known balm these days is the Vermont “Bag Balm,” which is officially for cows’ udders, but has dozens of “off-label” uses.

And you may know that Gilead is a mountainous region east of the Jordan River in modern Jordan. It is a rugged country, with peaks as high as 3,500 feet as well as plains and grasslands suitable for cattle. In biblical times, there was a famous “Balm of Gilead” that was made in a few oases in the Dead Sea basin, notably Jericho and En Gedi. Today, this balm is known as Balsam of Mecca, and it continues to be made from a plant related to the plant from which we get myrrh.³

Although the spiritual, “There is a Balm in Gilead” is very popular, I’ve not been able to find any account of the origins of the song or of the tune to which it is sung. But whatever the setting or arrangement of the song, and whether it is sung by a soloist, a choir, or a congregation, **its message continues to be that regardless of our circumstances, we can find healing, hope, and liberation in Jesus, who is the real Balm of our Souls.**⁴

Together with Jeremiah, I imagine that we, too, are well acquainted with cries similar to his, though the sources of our anguish are different: “*The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved. . . . Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?*” As I’ve thought about these questions, it has seemed to me

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on February 9, 2014.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There_Is_a_Balm_in_Gilead

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balm_of_Gilead

⁴ www.gbod.org/minister-to-people/music-resources/resource/black-history-month-there-is-a-balm-in-gilead

that a major factor underlying these queries has to do with the presence or absence of hope; and that's why our responsive reading earlier had to do with hope.

I well remember a particular morning some years ago when I was complaining to God. In the midst of my complaint, God's Spirit told me to pick up a particular devotional book on my desk and to read the devotion for that day. These were the words I read: ²⁷ *Why do you complain . . . ? Why do you say . . . "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"?*

²⁸ *Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.* ²⁹ *He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.* ³⁰ *Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;* ³¹ *but those who **hope** in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint* (Isaiah 40:27-31). That was an electric moment that I'll never forget, and it resulted in a renewal of Hope.

The fact of the matter is that the kind of Hope of which I speak has a great deal to do with trust, and the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann contended that it is only possible to hope to the extent that it is possible to trust.⁵ Living in such Hope means "to live in the expectation that the love we have known in Jesus Christ will continue to express itself as the meaning and fulfillment of life, *whatever comes.*"⁶

The truth is that, like Faith, Hope does not actually "see" the future; it does not know what is going to happen. Nevertheless, Hope *trusts* the future, and *affirms* the future as if it were clearly seen (Hebrews 11:1). Because God has proven trustworthy over and over and over again, Hope "remembers" that trustworthiness forward, into the future that we cannot see.⁷

God-anchored Hope is secure in the trust that, even though life often brings sacrifice and suffering, "Where God is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution are not the absolutely final things" (Hebrews 6:19a).⁸

Though Hope does trust, and trusts deeply, the fact remains that you and I live today in the "interval of tension" between the giving of God's promises and their final and complete fulfillment. Thus, while having Hope means many things, one of those things is the ability to be patient, to wait.

Stephen Shoemaker noted that impatient people cannot and do not wait for God to bring in the Kingdom in God's own way and in God's own time. They insist that God act immediately, according to their wishes and desires.

Without patience, we fall into demanding that the future come NOW, in the shape that we prefer. Such impatience typically leads either to despair or to fanaticism, as persons adopt violent or coercive means to accomplish what they believe to be the goals of the Kingdom.⁹ In stark

⁵Jürgen Moltmann, *The Power of the Powerless* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 113.

⁶Robert Carrigan, "Where Has Hope Gone? Toward an Understanding of Hope in Pastoral Care," *Pastoral Psychology*, 25 (1976), 52.

⁷Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), p. 53.

⁸William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902, Foreword by Jacques Barzun (New York: Mentor Books, 1958), p. 390.

⁹Stephen Shoemaker, *The Jekyll and Hyde Syndrome: A New Encounter with the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Lively Virtues* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), pp. 174-175.

counterpoint to such faithlessness, people of Hope continue to use means as pure as their ends, trusting God to use those means to accomplish the divine purpose according to God's timetable.

I want to use some very human examples to illustrate what the presence and the absence of such faith-full and patient Hope look like. I'm pretty sure you'll know all these people, except perhaps the last one.

Mickey Mantle. Mickey Mantle's last press conference on July 11, 1995 was a standing-room-only event. It was also a very somber moment. Mantle's robust physique and his "Popeye" muscles were gone. Mantle's clothes hung loosely on his desiccated frame, and those present said he looked like death itself.

You may or may not remember that Mickey Mantle's last years were spent enslaved to alcohol. "God gave me a great body and an ability to play baseball," he said. "God gave me everything, and I just . . . pffff! I'd like to say to all the kids out there, if you're looking for a role model, this is a role model: *don't be like me.*"¹⁰

Evander Holyfield. Evander Holyfield earned an amazing \$205 million as heavyweight boxing's only five-time world champion.¹¹ Holyfield lives in a 54,000 square foot mansion in Fayetteville, Georgia, is an avid collector of automobiles, and has a stable of thoroughbred horses worth millions. His estate is situated on hundreds of acres, with a regulation-size baseball diamond and miles of horse and motorcycle trails.

Although Holyfield will be remembered as one of the greatest boxing champions of all time, he continues to fight even after losing his boxing crown. In an interview, he said the reason he continues to fight is that, even with all this stuff, "*I'm bored.*"¹²

Mike Tyson. As boxing buffs know, Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield fought each other in several celebrated and controversial matches. Tyson, once the most feared heavyweight boxer in the ring, is anything but at peace with himself today. After a decadent lifestyle left him with shattered finances, broken relationships, and a ruined reputation, Tyson said in an interview with *USA Today*, "I'll never be happy. . . . I'm really a sad, pathetic case. . . . My whole life has been a waste—*I've been a failure.*"¹³

Brad Pitt. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Brad Pitt sounded a similar note: "I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us—the car, the condo, our version of success—but if that's the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more impotence and isolation and desperation and loneliness?"

"The emphasis now is on success and personal gain. I'm sitting in it, and I'm telling you, *that's not it.* I'm the guy who's got everything. I know. But I'm telling you, once you've got everything, then you're just left with yourself. . . . I say toss all this—we've got to find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don't want that."¹⁴

Well, there's not much hope, not much balm in the "Gilead" those four guys know, is there? Let me move on to two people who know what real Hope looks like.

¹⁰ Jane Leavy, *The Last Boy* (HarperCollins, 2010), p. 374.

¹¹ www.evanderholyfield.com

¹² Chris Bennett, "The Secret of Satisfaction," www.sermonnotes.com.

¹³ Jon Saraceno, "Tyson: My Whole Life Has Been a Waste," *USA Today*, June 3, 2005.

¹⁴ *Rolling Stone*, October 28, 1999.

Ben Carson. I'll bet you know who Ben Carson is. Born in Detroit to parents from rural Georgia who divorced when he was eight years old, Ben and his older brother were raised by their mother in dire poverty. Determined that her boys were going to make something of themselves, Ben's mother allowed them to watch almost no television and required them to read several books from the Detroit Public Library every week. She also required them to submit written book reports to her, although she kept secret from them the fact that she didn't know how to read.

"We were very poor," Ben wrote, "but between the covers of those books, I could go anywhere. I could be anybody. I could do anything. I began to read about people of great accomplishment, and as I read those stories, I began to see a connecting thread. *I began to see that the person who has the most to do with you and with what happens to you in life . . . is you.*"¹⁵

Ben graduated from Southwestern High School in Detroit and then graduated from Yale University, where he majored in psychology. Ben received his medical degree from the University of Michigan Medical School before becoming a neurosurgery resident at Johns Hopkins Hospital just down the road from us. An extremely gifted surgeon, Carson eventually became a professor of neurosurgery, oncology, plastic surgery, and pediatrics, and at the age of 33 he became Director of Pediatric Neurosurgery, the youngest Director of a major division in Hopkins history.

As you probably know, Ben Carson is an outspoken follower of Jesus, and he is also the source of a long list of quotable quotes. Here are just a few of them:

- "Do your best and let God do the rest."
- "Successful people don't have fewer problems. They have determined that nothing will stop them from going forward."
- "Happiness doesn't result from what we *get*, but from what we *give*."
- "God cares about every area of our lives, and God wants us to ask for help. If we acknowledge our need for God, He will help us."
- "I'm a good neurosurgeon. That's not a boast but a way of acknowledging the innate ability God has given to me. It's my belief that God gives us all gifts, special abilities that we have the privilege of developing to help us serve Him and humanity."
- "I have come to realize that God does not want to punish us, but rather, to fulfill our lives. God created us, loves us, and wants to help us realize our potential so that we can be useful to others."

Oseola McCarty. The last person I want to mention may be someone of whom you've never heard, but I think she may be the most inspiring of all. Her name was Oseola McCarty.

Oseola quit school after the fifth grade to care for a sick aunt during the Great Depression, and she lived out her years as a simple washerwoman in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Without meaning to, Oseola catapulted herself onto the national stage in 1995 when she gave \$150,000 of the \$280,000 she had saved over the years as scholarship money to the University of Southern Mississippi, a school she had never even visited.

The nation responded with sheer amazement at Oseola's thrift, generosity, and humility. She received the Presidential Citizens' Medal, the second highest award that can be given to

¹⁵ www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/11100.Ben_Carson. The rest of the Carson quotes are from this same source.

civilians. Barbara Walters named her one of America's Ten Most Fascinating People, and Harvard University granted her an honorary doctorate. Here are some memorable quotes from Oseola:

- “Some people make a lot of noise about what’s wrong with the world, and they are usually blaming somebody else. I think people who don’t like the way things are need to look at themselves first. They need to get right with God and change their own ways. *That way, they will know that they are making a difference in at least one life.* If everybody did that, we’d be all right.”
- “There’s a lot of talk about self-esteem these days. It seems pretty basic to me. *If you want to feel proud of yourself, you’ve got to do things you can be proud of. Feelings follow actions.*”
- “*Hard work gives life meaning.* Everyone needs to work hard at something to feel good about themselves. Every job can be done well and every day has its satisfactions. Work is a blessing. As long as I am living, I want to be working at something. Just because I am old doesn’t mean I can’t work.”
- “When I leave this world, I can’t take nothing away from here. I’m old and I won’t live always—that’s why I gave the money to the school and put my affairs in order. I planned it and I am proud of it. I am proud that I worked hard and that my money will help young people who have worked hard to deserve it. I’m proud that I’m leaving something positive in this world. *My only regret is that I didn’t have more to give.*”
- “I know people who don’t know God just can’t understand that He’s real. Hearing the gospel means nothing to them because their ears aren’t open. But the greatest lesson of faith I know is that you have to be willing to grow in grace. You have to be willing to start at the beginning and become like a child. You have to accept God the best way you know how and then He’ll show Himself to you. *And the more you serve Him, the more able you are to serve Him.*”

Now which of the six persons I’ve mentioned really understood Hope? Which of them had found the Balm in Gilead? I hope you can see that the key to real Hope is the discovery that The Balm of Gilead is not an ointment. The Balm of Gilead is a relationship with a Person: Jesus of Nazareth, our Prophet, Priest, and King!

As Peter put it, “*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us **a new birth into a living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for you who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. . . .*”

“*Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls*” (1 Peter 1:3-5, 8-9).

And all God’s people said, “Amen!”