

JEREMIAH ... WHO ASKED AWKWARD QUESTIONS

Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? (Jer. 8:22)

The story of the balm of Gilead provides exciting, informative, I and thought-provoking reading. Details can be found in various places throughout the Scripture. When the brothers of Joseph were planning how to dispose of him, "they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt" (Gen. 37:25).

When the family of Jacob desperately needed food, the patriarch was reluctant to permit Benjamin to accompany his other children on their journey. He was told how the great man in Egypt had insisted on seeing the young man, and the required food would be unobtainable without the consent of the official. Jacob was thus compelled by these circumstances to accept the advice of his sons. Hoping to please Pharaoh's administrator, Jacob said, "Take of the best fruits in the land in your vessels, and carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and almonds: And take double money in your hand" (Gen. 43:11-12, emphasis mine).

The fact that only a little balm was sent may indicate its value; even a small amount would be a valued commodity. It can safely be assumed the fame of Gilead's medicinal balm had spread internationally even in the early days of Israel's history. The importance of the product was increased enormously when the queen of Sheba visited Solomon. Josephus, the Jewish historian, said,

She brought with her, camels laden with gold, with several sorts of sweet spices, and with precious stones... Now when the Queen had thus demonstrated in words how deeply the king had affected

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her, her disposition was known by certain presents, for she gave him twenty talents of gold, and an enormous quantity of spices and precious stones. (They say also that we possess the root of that balsom which our country still bears by the woman's gift.) Solomon also repaid her with many good things. There was nothing she desired which he denied her. And as he was very generous and liberal in his own temper, so did he show the greatness of his soul in bestowing on her what she herself desired. (Flavius Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews, 8.6.5-6)

Thousands of years before Christ the balm of Gilead was important in the export trade of the nations. It was derived from the root and branches of a tree and the finished product was used for healing wounds and treating stomach ailments. "The tree is evergreen; a straggly tree with a few trifoliate flowers. The white flowers are borne three in a cluster. When a cut is made in the trunk or branches of the tree, the sap exudes. The small, sticky globules harden and then may easily be removed from the bark. It is possible to get this gum from the root" (The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 1 {Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975}, 456). Commentators agree with Josephus, who said, "It was an odorous and costly gum indigenous to India, Arabia and Babylon." Jericho was Israel's center of this thriving industry. The climate was suitable for the cultivation of the trees, and it may be assumed that with the expertise of Solomon, the district exploited this unusual product. Many physicians had offices in the neighborhood, and

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caravan traders regularly purchased remedies for all kinds of ailments. It is against this background the quotations of Jeremiah must be considered.

The Rebuke by Jeremiah ... Uncompromising

Northern Israel had already been overrun by invading armies, and most of the men had been taken into captivity. Meanwhile, Judea and Jerusalem had been granted a respite. Although the people were frightened, they listened to the warnings of their prophet who stood in the streets and asked solemn questions: "Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" There could have been a trace of sarcasm in his voice, for every citizen knew there was an abundance of the precious balm available for purchase. The health of Israel was being threatened because the problem was not physical. Physicians could not supply what

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the nation needed. They could bring relief to ordinary sufferers, but only Jehovah could heal their souls. Jeremiah had no illusions about that fact and was trying to awaken spiritual instincts within stubborn people. He had already communicated the message of God, which said, "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. Is Israel a servant? is he a homeborn slave? why is he spoiled?" (Jer. 2:13-14). Listeners knew what was expected, but refused to respond. Later, when the situation appeared to be hopeless, Jeremiah sorrowfully said, "The harvest is passed; the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

The efforts of the farmers had been ruined either by pests or drought; the time of harvest had already gone. Jeremiah used that tragic fact in his attempt to arouse the conscience of the nation. When he said, "For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt," he provided a glimpse into the compassionate heart of the Almighty. The Lord was anxious to help even indifferent and obstinate folk. They did not know their best efforts were insufficient to meet the national need. The balm of Gilead was limited in its capability. Only God could heal souls.

Recently, the United States of America has experienced two political conventions. Both the Democratic and Republican parties gathered their representatives from every part of the country, and their speakers were extremely eloquent describing the shortcomings of their opponents. Every four years the people suffer through repeat performances when similar charges are made. Democrats believe the Republicans have failed to fulfill earlier promises, and Republicans confidently assert they won major victories in their foreign policy. It was surprising that no speaker emphasized the only true way to solve the problems of America is to enthrone God in Washington and in every home and heart in the nation. There is need to recognize another kind of balm in Gilead. The poet said it best:

There is a balm in Gilead,
To make the wounded whole:
There is a balm in Gilead,
To heal the sin-sick soul.

The Rebellion in Jerusalem... Unforgivable

A special meeting had been convened in Jerusalem, but the people who attended were worried. The city was in ruins, and most of the

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renowned citizens were absent. Foreign invaders had destroyed homes and forced former inhabitants into slavery. A small remnant had been

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left to occupy the ruins; food was almost unobtainable; the future was bleak. Many in the meeting had already expressed a wish to migrate to Egypt where conditions were more congenial. Yet they still had a prophet named Jeremiah who could pray. Jehovah would recognize the wisdom of their decision and give them His blessing.

Then all the captains . . . said unto Jeremiah the prophet, Let, we beseech thee, our supplication be accepted before thee, and pray for us unto the LORD thy God, even for all this remnant; (for we are left but a few of many, as thine eyes do behold us:) That the LORD thy God may shew us the way wherein we may walk, and the thing that we may do. Then Jeremiah the prophet said unto them, I have heard you; behold, I will pray unto the LORD your God according to your words; and it shall come to pass, that whatsoever thing the LORD shall answer you, I will declare it unto you; I will keep nothing back from you. (Jer. 42:1-4)

The listeners breathed a sigh of relief; even Jehovah would agree it would be better to eat and live in Egypt than to starve and die in Jerusalem.

The impatient people were restless and wondered what had happened to that preacher! Had he forgotten how to pray, or was his God slow to answer? "And it came to pass after ten days, that the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah" (v. 7, emphasis mine). The prophet was apprehensive as he prepared to deliver God's message.

Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel, unto whom ye sent me to present your supplication before him; If ye will still abide in this land, then will I build you, and not pull you down, and I will plant you, and not pluck you up. . . . But if ye say, We will not dwell in this land, neither obey the voice of the LORD your God, Saying, No; but we will go into the land of Egypt, where we shall see no war, nor hear the sound of the trumpet, nor have hunger of bread; and there will we dwell: . . . Then it shall come to pass, that the sword, which ye feared, shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine, whereof ye were afraid, shall follow close after you there in Egypt; and there ye shall die. (Jer. 42:9-14, 16)

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The listeners scowled; they were angry with God and His servant. "Then spake Azariah . . . and all the proud men, saying unto Jeremiah, Thou speakest falsely: the LORD our God hath not sent thee to say. Go not into Egypt to sojourn there. . . . So they came into the land of Egypt: for they obeyed not the voice of the LORD" (Jer. 43:2, 7). The prophet realized again why the balm of Gilead could not help sinful people.

The Rebellion of the Jews ... Unprecedented

When the rebellious Hebrews went to Egypt, Jeremiah was obliged to accompany them. It has always been evident that when people abandon God, He continues to care for them. That fact is hard to understand. The Jews had forsaken the King of Kings in order to worship a queen of heaven! "Seest thou not what they do in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough, to make cakes to the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto other gods, that they may provoke me to anger" (Jer. 7:17-18). Other nations worshiped the goddess of fertility, which they addressed as the queen of heaven. Cakes were made in the shape of a woman's body, and placed on altars so that the goddess could help herself.

It remains incomprehensible how intelligent people can believe such strange doctrines. Nevertheless, in many parts of the world these

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offerings are still made. People devoted to idols offer food when they themselves are dying of malnutrition. Even after the Hebrews had entered Egypt they continued their idolatrous practices: "Then all the men which knew that their wives had burned incense unto other gods, and all the women that stood by, a great multitude, even all the people that dwelt in the land of Egypt, in Pathros, answered Jeremiah, saying, As for the word that thou hast spoken unto us in the name of the LORD, we will not hearken unto thee. But we will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth, to burn incense unto the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto her" (Jer. 44:15-17). To such obstinate people the prophet said, "Go up into Gilead, and take balm, O virgin, the daughter of Egypt: in vain shalt thou use many medicines; for thou shalt not be cured" (Jer. 46:11). The best of human remedies can never be an effective substitute for the healing powers of the grace of God.

Many years later, when Jesus was walking to the home of Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, "a woman having an issue of blood twelve years, which had spent all her living upon physicians, neither could be healed

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of any, Came behind him, and touched the border of his garment: and immediately her issue of blood stanchèd" (Luke 8:43-44). That unfortunate lady discovered two kinds of physicians. Those who took and gave nothing; and the Great Physician who was the true Balm of Gilead. No person ever sought His aid and came away disappointed.

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