

Is There A Doctor in the House? – Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

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We've passed another anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on our country. It's hard to believe it's already been 18 years since that tragedy.

Last week, I watched part of a documentary on the events of that day. It wasn't brand new—I think it was produced on the 10-year anniversary.

The opening scenes, of course, are horrifying. After the planes struck the World Trade Center Towers in Manhattan, there were two moments that were mentioned in the documentary that really framed the horror of the day.

The first was the scene of people in the twin towers after the planes had struck them. The buildings were on fire, and smoke and flames were billowing out of them. And from a distance, the cameras showed people in the windows several floors up. And all of a sudden, the people began to jump from the building—50, 60, even 100 floors up—to their deaths below.

Can we imagine a situation so horrifying for these people that they determined the best option was for them to die by jumping out of the windows?

The second moment that crystalized the horror of the day was when then-mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani was interviewed for the video. He said he turned to members of his team at one point and asked a question he said he never anticipated ever having to ask in his job: Do we have enough body bags for the victims? The response he got was equally troubling. "We're not going to need body bags, Mr. Mayor," someone said. For the fire and the ensuing collapse of the towers was so devastating and powerful that the victims were simply incinerated and pulverized. There was no trace of thousands of them during the recovery.

We've had other horrible moments in our collective history since 9/11. There have been devastating natural disasters and other acts of violence. And every time these things happen, it makes us angry and sad and bewildered. It also propels us to lift a collective cry for help. We need somebody to come to our rescue in our moments of crisis and despair.

Those crises may be the disasters propelled upon us by others or the disasters we propel upon ourselves through our own misbehavior. Regardless, we need help.

Have you ever called out for help when you needed it? I mean, really verbally yelled for help? If you've ever had that need, you know it's a frightening time.

Sometimes it arises in the privacy of our own home. Or sometimes we experience the need in a public setting.

You can understand why one of a preacher's first tasks in learning a new congregation is acquainting him or herself with all the doctors and nurses in the church. Because sometimes there may be the need during worship or some other event to employ their skills during some sort of medical emergency. And we're blessed to have a small cadre of folks here who can spring into action and bring assistance.

The team at *Homiletics* offers some pointed comparisons to the healing we often seek in emergencies and the healing Jeremiah sought for the people of Judah:

In Gilead, the town where our Old Testament story is set, apparently no physician can be found.

"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"

The prophet Jeremiah is plaintively calling for a doctor. It's not that someone near him is having a medical crisis. The patient's not even a person. It's a nation — his own nation of Judah.

We can easily imagine Jeremiah weeping as he cries for help. His heart is breaking because of his people's unfaithfulness.

Chaos is breaking out all around him. After a brief and encouraging reform by the good king Josiah, the people of Judah are backsliding. They're worshiping foreign gods and falling into all manner of immorality.

But this is not the most alarming thing. A Babylonian invasion is looming on the horizon. The armies have assembled. Jeremiah can almost spot the Chaldean banners fluttering in the breeze. The corrupt king, Jehoiakim, seems not to notice. He does nothing. He's too busy partying in the palace. Rome burns, and he's fiddling.

As for the people of Judah, they're not much better. They don't see what the prophet sees. They don't share his expansive vision. The prophetic watchtower has no appeal. They'd rather scabble for shekels in the teeming streets. They can't see beyond their own petty problems and pleasures.

When Jeremiah asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" he's referring to a famous resin, harvested from the trunks of balsam pine trees that grew in the Gilead region. A fragrant ointment refined from that pine sap was good for all kinds of ailments. You could say it was the Vicks VapoRub of the day — you know, that oily goo your mother used to spread on your chest when you had a cold. (Remember the pungent smell of that stuff — the menthol aroma that worked its way up into your nostrils and made you feel like you could breathe again?)

The balm of Gilead was probably something like that.

Jeremiah regards the corruption of his people — their hopelessness, their lack of a future — and cries out: "Is there no balm, no medicine that can help? Is there no doctor in the house, no one who can bring true healing to this wayward and ailing people?"

The ailment, of course, is sin. Jeremiah's addressing it using a medical model. For once, the prophet is not blasting the people for their immoral acts. He wants to heal them. He's talking of sin as a serious moral ailment, a disease that is lethal and can only be healed by an outside power.

Sin is not without its consequences. The Las Vegas tourist board aside, sin is not some spicy delight that "happens in Vegas, [but] stays in Vegas."

It never stays in Vegas. Sin infects the souls of those poor sinners who believe they can step onto a plane and take a vacation from morality for a few days. They only bring the contagion back home with them.

To be perfectly accurate, sin never originates in Vegas either, because the seeds of immoral behavior are already planted in sinners' hearts long before they get to the baggage claim.

Jeremiah's point is that sin is not just a collection of disconnected, immoral behaviors. He never pretends the solution to sin is just exercising a little willpower. "Just say no" is no answer. Jeremiah's a realist. He knows the problem runs much deeper than that. Sin is a deadly malady that needs to be healed.

*There's a telling phrase coined by Christian philosopher Dallas Willard. In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard speaks out against a distorted form of the Christian message he calls the "gospel of sin management."*

The gospel of sin management, he says, is proclaimed by church leaders on both the right and the left. Whether it's the collective social sins of tolerating poverty and homelessness, or the individual sins of adultery and stinginess, proponents of this stripped-down, incomplete version of the gospel teach that being a Christian is all about managing sinful behaviors. Just stop sinning, this school of thought teaches — or, at least, cut down on it — and God will smile on you, bestowing upon you the gift of eternal life.

The gospel of sin management, as it manifests itself within Christianity, is a hard ideal to live up to. Cutting out all sinful behaviors is well-nigh impossible. Yet, proponents of this way of thinking are quick to remind us that, while God may scrawl a bright red "F" on the top of our examination paper, the Lord is quick to counteract that negative judgment — saving us by giving an "A" for effort.

Over and against all these unrealistically optimistic ideologies is a much older creed: religion. Religion — be it Christianity, Judaism, Islam or some other faith — is not so optimistic about the human condition. Most of the great religions have within them some concept of sin. They see it as a fatal malady that gets hold of the human heart and never lets go — at least not of its own accord.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no doctor in the house to apply the miracle cure so sin may be banished and spiritual health and wholeness restored?

Jeremiah can name no such force — although he seems confident one must exist somewhere.

There is, in fact, such a cure. We know it in the Christian tradition as the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The African slaves of the American South knew it probably better than we. Held captive and oppressed all their days, laboring under the lash of the overseer, they were yet allowed to sing some spiritual songs as they worked. One of them is the beloved hymn based on this very passage from Jeremiah, "There Is a Balm in Gilead." That hymn endeavors to answer the prophet's plaintive cry.

So, what is this powerful medicine?

It's something we carry within our own bodies, in reservoirs behind our eyes. Special ducts convey this salty solution from its storage-place when we most need it. Our eyes well up with it, and its droplets roll down our cheeks.

It is, of course, tears. Tears of sorrow, tears of suffering, tears of heartfelt penitence. The slaves who sang that hymn had tears a-plenty, weeping as they sang of the precious remedy from far-off Gilead.

The tears we cry are water, mostly. Water is the principal ingredient in human tears. When we're profoundly moved, our bodies supply water to run down our cheeks.

So we're invited to sit down with Jeremiah and weep.

Let's cry over opportunities lost.

Let's cry about our foolish rebellion and pettiness.

Let's cry in remorse for chasing after foreign gods, such as fleeting pleasures and vapid materialism.

Let's cry tears of repentance.

Let's cry tears of bitter realization.

And then let's cry tears of joy.

Why?

Because there is a balm in Gilead ... it's the balm of Golgotha ... the balm of grace.

And Jesus is the Great Physician.

And when this balm is applied, we recall not the tears, but the waters of baptism. These waters literally flow down over our heads and upon our cheeks, but they figuratively heal our souls.

The balm of grace — the only thing in this weary world that can cure the sin-sick soul.

We are indebted and grateful to the God who made us and redeems us.