

Spirituals and the Exodus: There is a Balm in Gilead

5-Day Devotional

Day 1: The Question That Became a Proclamation

Reading

Jeremiah 8:18-22 - You who are 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 aroused my 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?

Devotional

When God asked through Jeremiah, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" it was a lament over His people's spiritual condition. They had chased after everything except Him, and their wounds remained unhealed. Yet 2,400 years later, enslaved people in America's deep South transformed God's question into a resounding answer: "There IS a balm in Gilead!"

In your darkest moments, when comfort seems distant and answers elusive, remember that the deepest faith often emerges from the deepest suffering. The question isn't whether healing exists—it's whether you'll turn to the true Physician. God's heart breaks when His children suffer, and He has already provided the answer to every spiritual wound.

Reflection

What wounds in your life need God's healing touch today? Will you turn His ancient question into your personal proclamation of faith?

Day 2: When Comfort Makes Us Spiritually Lazy

Reading

Numbers 21:4-9 -They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea,^[a] to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Devotional

The Israelites' journey should have taken eighteen months, but their fear and complaints extended it to forty years. Comfort and safety became more important than obedience and trust. When the consequences of their choices caught up with them, they finally acknowledged their sin and cried out for help.

We often do the same—chasing illusions of happiness, selling our souls for temporary security, and then wondering why life feels so hard. Spiritual complacency creeps in when we rely on our own strength rather than God's provision. But notice God's response: He didn't abandon them in their self-inflicted crisis because God didn't send the snakes, even though they thought that was the case.

Reflection

Where has comfort made you spiritually lazy? What illusions are you chasing instead of pursuing God's promises for your life?

Day 3: Blessed Are the Meek

Reading

Matthew 5:1-12 - Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.

He said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Devotional

"Blessed are the meek" doesn't mean blessed are the weak or passive. The Greek word carries the meaning of those who rely on God rather than their own strength to defend them against injustice. The enslaved people who sang "There is a Balm in Gilead" embodied this beatitude—they had no earthly power, no luxury of time to gradually repent like John Newton, yet they proclaimed unwavering hope.

True meekness is radical trust in God's justice when the world offers none. It's choosing faith over fear, hope over despair, and God's truth over the world's lies. These meek ones didn't just survive—they created a legacy of faith that still inspires us today. They will indeed inherit the earth.

Reflection

In what situation do you need to stop relying on your own strength and instead trust God to defend you?

Day 4: Lifted Up for Our Healing

Reading

John 3:14-21 - Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Devotional

Jesus drew a direct line between Moses' bronze serpent and His own crucifixion. Just as the Israelites looked upon the lifted serpent and found physical healing, all who look upon Jesus lifted on the cross find spiritual wholeness. God's love expressed itself in the most unexpected way—through suffering, death, and resurrection.

The balm in Gilead isn't a place or a medicine; it's a person. Jesus is the ultimate answer to Jeremiah's ancient question and the fulfillment of the slaves' hopeful proclamation. God so loved the world that He gave everything to heal our sin-sick souls. The remedy isn't found in chasing worldly comfort but in gazing upon the One who suffered for us.

Reflection

How does understanding Jesus as "the balm" change your perspective on finding healing and wholeness? What does it mean to "look upon" Jesus today?

Day 5: From Complaint to Confession

Reading

Psalm 51:1-12 - Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Devotional

The Israelites' transformation from complaining to confessing reveals the path to healing: "We have sinned...pray for us." Ownership, authenticity, and humility opened the door for God's intervention. They stopped blaming circumstances and acknowledged their choices had consequences.

John Newton's journey mirrors this—from active participation in evil to public confession and advocacy for justice. His words, "a business at which my heart now shudders," show genuine repentance. But the enslaved people who had no luxury of gradual awakening showed us that authentic faith doesn't require comfort—it requires surrender.

The balm is only a prayer away. Healing begins when we stop crafting narratives that justify our complaints and instead come authentically before God, admitting our need and His sufficiency.

Reflection

What do you need to confess rather than complain about? How can you move from self-justification to authentic surrender today?

Closing Prayer for the Week: Lord Jesus, You are the balm in Gilead who makes the wounded whole and heals the sin-sick soul. Help us to stop chasing illusions and instead find our rest, healing, and hope in You alone. When life is hard, teach us to rely on Your strength rather than our own. Lift our eyes to see You, lifted high for our salvation. Amen.