

Is there no physician

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[0 : 00] Turn back then to the passage that we read, the prophecy of Jeremiah, chapter 8. We can read again at verse 18.

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick within me. Behold the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land. Is the Lord not in Sion? Is our King not in earth? Why have they provoked me to anger with their car of damages and with their foreign idols? The harvest has passed, the summer has ended, and we are not saved. For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded.

I mourn and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no precision there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?

And particularly the words in verse 22. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no precision there? I suppose the prophecy of Jeremiah is one of these books that many of us tend to avoid.

[1 : 16] And perhaps we avoid it simply because of its mournfulness. It is a constant dirge, if one can put it that way, of lamentation.

In fact, his prophecy and the lamentations which follow lead to Jeremiah being known so often as the weeping prophet. And that is why we read the words at the beginning of chapter 9.

And know that my head were of waters and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. And I suppose the first thing that we need to do is really put into context.

Why was Jeremiah constantly mourning and speaking about the disasters and the situation in Jerusalem?

I'm quite sure as we read chapter 8, you would have thought that it is a chapter that is full of criticism of what was going on among the people of Judah at this particular time.

[2 : 25] Remember the ten crimes of the north, the kingdom of Israel no longer exists. They had already been taken into captivity at this point by the Assyrians.

And Jeremiah has been sent by the Lord to prophesy to the house of Judah. We're given in the very first chapter, if you turn to the beginning of the first chapter of the words of Jeremiah, you'll find his own background in the first few verses.

The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah, the son of Ammon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign.

It came also in the days of Jehohagam, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Sedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

There are various things we can deduce from this, and various things that we know about Jeremiah as a result of his writing. He is, as we read there, a son of a priest, and therefore would himself have eventually come into the priesthood as well.

[3 : 45] And as such, he probably was a Levite, or most certainly was a Levite. And we see the time through which he is sent to prophesy.

It is the last number of kings of Judah. In particular, we will see to the end of the eleventh year of Sedekiah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

Sedekiah is the last king of Judah, before Nebuchadnezzar comes and destroys Jerusalem, and takes the great majority of the people of Judah and Benjamin into captivity in Babylon.

We'll come to the reason for that in a moment or two. Jeremiah, as far as we know, as far as we can tell from the later chapters in his prophecy, was not taken to Babylon, unlike some of the others.

You remember, of course, that Daniel and Ezra and Nehemiah were all taken into captivity in Babylon. Daniel was a very young man, and he lived there all his life, never came back.

[4 : 50] But Ezra and Nehemiah, later on, are responsible for coming back under the decree of Cyrus. And again, it's curious, not curious, it's fascinating that if you look in Isaiah, you will find the prophecy written there of what Cyrus would do.

That Cyrus would allow them, would not only capture Babylon, but would allow the Jews to return to rebuild the temple, known as the second temple, the temple of Zerubbabel, in years to come, after the 70 years of captivity had ended.

And for those who are sceptical about the truth of the Bible very often, one of the questions that you might like to consider sometimes is, how is it that prophecy, which is made sometimes hundreds of years before the event takes place, is outlined in great detail in some of the words of the prophets. It's particularly curious if you look at how Cyrus actually captures Babylon by diverting the river and entering up the dry riverbed.

You'll find that outlined very clearly in the prophecy of Isaiah. I think it's chapter 42, if I remember correctly, but I might be wrong on the number of the chapter. You can check it later yourselves.

[6 : 14] But Jeremiah is not taken into captivity. In fact, he is forced to flee from Jerusalem later on by those who then flee from there when they rebel against Nebuchadnezzar and flee to Egypt.

And as far as we know, he dies in Egypt. Tradition says that he was stoned to death by the Jews because he constantly kept reminding them that the Egyptians would lead them into further idolatry and not be any help to them.

Now, that's the background to the prophet, called at a young age, probably around 14 or 15. And he probably prophesied for something over 40 years. A long ministry.

But a ministry that was a very painful one and a very sad one for him. Why? Because he is sent by the Lord to tell the people to turn from idols.

Some of the kings had attempted, particularly Hezekiah and Josiah, had attempted to return to the worship of the God of Israel. And many outward reforms were carried out by them.

[7 : 26] But the people in general still went after idols. And what they were doing at this particular stage when Jeremiah is prophesying here is that they were carrying out some of the rituals of the Mosaic law and bringing sacrifice, etc.

But that they were doing so and worshipping idols at the same time. And that is what God is telling Jeremiah to speak about, particularly in verse 4 and verse 5 of the chapter.

You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return? Why has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding?

They hold fast to deceit. They refuse to return. And you see again in verse 8, How can you say, We are wise and the law of the Lord is with us.

And they still believed that because they had the Mosaic law and the priesthood and the temple still at this stage, they still believed, in spite of their idolatry, that God was on their side.

[8 : 39] That God would save them from their enemies. It's quite interesting that if you read many of the things that we have in this particular chapter, and again, it's not my main focus this evening, you can look at that yourself again, how many parallels you can draw between the situation of Judah and Benjamin at this particular time, and what is going on in our own country right now.

Do we worship idols? Well, not in the same way. Of course, we have no statues or things that we worship, I suppose, in that sense.

We do not bow down to the sun and the moon. We do not openly, as far as I know, sacrifice our children to Moloch, the god of Babylon, and so on. But we have our own idols.

And it's interesting that if you start to analyse what has gone on in our own society, in our own country, in the last 50 or 60 years, I wonder what you would identify as the new idols of our nation, as a national thing.

Probably the word tolerance and political correctness comes to mind. That hidden under these things are, of course, a form of idolatry, in which these things are far more important than the principles of God's word.

[10 : 17] There are so many things in which, not only in our laws, but in our daily conversation, in our daily life, the principles of God's word are completely and utterly ignored.

And we are, in many, many ways, so similar to the situation in Judah at the time that Jeremiah was prophesying.

And I often wonder, as I meditate on these things, whether the Lord will visit this country again. perhaps with disaster, for having forsaken the principles of his word. But it may well be, as Jeremiah is praying, and I'm sure that so many of us are praying, that it may be again that the Lord will come down among us and bring times of refreshing and times of revival. these are things that we ought to be praying for. Because day by day, we can see how our land, how our government, how our nation is turning its back on God.

[11 : 30] those of you who are older, like myself, all you have to do is remember the days of your childhood where churches were full.

And where many, many things that take place now on a daily basis and are regarded as quite normal would have been regarded in horror and perhaps in shock by many of the older generations. we have changed completely. And so many people, of course, say that it is because it is a better and a fairer society. Perhaps that's the case for some people.

When God's laws and the principles of God's word are trampled underfoot, one questions whether that is in the interests of society as a whole.

And again, I'm not going to spend any further time on that and it's not really what I want to deal with this particular evening. But I'm sure you can think yourselves of many situations that our country and our laws have changed over the last while which leads us to or which leads me to make those kind of statements.

[12 : 45] And Jeremiah, among others, is sent then to prophesy and to tell the people that unless they clean up their act, that the Lord is coming to punish them.

And he says so even in verse 16, the snorting of their horses is heard from Dan. The northernmost part of what had been the kingdom of Israel the first to fall into idolatry and it was from there that the Assyrians had come, had moved south from there to destroy the land of Israel and from there now the Babylonians were coming.

what was God's purpose in sending his people into captivity for 70 years. It's foretold in the prophets.

Isaiah mentions it, Jeremiah mentions it, Ezekiel is one of the prophets of the captivity as well. And we see that God says all the time that his purpose is that Israel and Judah and those taken into captivity will be cleansed from their idolatry.

Never again after returning from captivity, never again did the Jews worship idols. Never again. Historians believe that it was in Babylon that the custom of synagogues first began as they had no temple no tabernacle that they built places of worship.

[14 : 15] They were allowed to build places of worship and it was from there that the synagogues were re-imported back into the land of Israel. Although there was a temple, a second temple rebuilt in Jerusalem and again although that was destroyed later on Herod would then rebuild the temple that we know so well from the time of our Lord.

But Jeremiah cannot understand why this is happening. Why are the people not responding to the word that he has prophesied?

But even when God says in verse 17 For behold I am sending among you serpents, adders that cannot be charmed and they shall bite you declares the Lord and then Jeremiah's grief comes out. My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick within me. Behold the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and the breadth of the land, is the Lord not in Sion?

Is her king not in her? And again the assumption that because there was still a temple in Jerusalem, a temple in Sion, is the Lord, is the king not there?

[15 : 27] Is God not there? Surely things will be alright. God won't do this but he points out very clearly. Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?

And then comes the lamentation. The harvest is past, the summer has ended and we are not saved. For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded and worn and the slave has taken hold upon me.

And then we come to the words of our text. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Well, first of all, where was Gilead?

Well, Gilead is not a particular region that can be defined exactly. It lay on the wilderness side of Jordan that is in what is nowadays Transjordan or probably nowadays in the kingdom of Jordan itself and it had been the inheritance that had been given to the tribe of Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

Fertile land but not belonging to any one particular tribe. And it is from there that this commodity, the balm of Gilead, was brought.

[16:52] What was it? It's quite an interesting study to do and to see where it occurs in Scripture. It's first referred to very early on in Genesis 37 when we find Joseph having been dropped into it by his brothers when they are discussing what they should do with him.

Remember that some of them wanted to kill him but at that particular time they see a caravan of Ishmaelites passing by and they sell them as a slave down to Egypt.

And we read that the Ishmaelites were carrying balm from Gilead. It was one of the commodities that they sold. Almost certainly selling it down in Egypt.

Jacob sent some to Joseph later on without knowing who Joseph was.

You remember when he sent the brothers to get food for the famine that was in the land of Israel but he sends a gift of a little balm.

[18:12] A little balm. Not a lot but a little. We'll come to that in a moment. The Queen of Sheba brought some as a present to Solomon.

To be more correct she brought a couple of the trees. Now it's quite interesting where these trees came from. She, if the Queen of Sheba as so many of us think came from the country that we now know as Yemen then she probably brought them from there and according to Jewish history they were planted in two gardens in Jericho until eventually over many centuries they disappeared and probably died out.

But whether that was the same balm as the balm trees of Gilead is quite an interesting conjunction. When the Romans conquered the area Pompey took one tree to Rome and so did Vespasian in AD 79.

History doesn't tell us what happened to those trees but if you think you begin to think why was the tree regarded so highly that it would be brought as a present among kings and queens and sent by Jacob and sold by the Ishmaelites as something that was so important.

Well as far as we know the balm came from a variety of tree called an ambros tree and as far as we know nowadays the only place that it's found is in Yemen where there are still a few trees of this kind growing but they seem not to have been exactly the same trees as were found in Gilead.

[20:05] The trees of Gilead have disappeared completely. Nobody knows what exactly happened to them whether they were cut down or they simply died out or what. But there are several things that we can say about this balm.

How was it collected? Well those of you who are familiar with rubber trees will know that the way that you cut or that you collect rubber from a rubber tree is you have to make a cut an incision in the tree itself and then you place a vessel of some kind beside the trunk of the tree and the resin or the sap flows or runs out and is collected in these cups.

Now if you've ever seen pictures of rubber trees being milked as they call it like that you will know that of course enormous amounts of rubber or latex are collected from trees annually.

But the balm as far as we can see the balm was something that gave only a few drops every year and therefore it was incredibly expensive extremely expensive.

It was difficult to collect but it was extremely expensive and it seems to have been made into some kind of ointment.

[21:33] Some think it was used as an anointing ointment and are some who think for example that the alabaster flask that the woman broke over Jesus' head or to pour the oil over his head that it may have contained the balm.

But it would seem unlikely it would seem that the balm was too expensive for someone of that particular social class to have been able to have it but it's quite possible.

But it seems so clear that the balm was regarded as a cure for virtually every type of illness. In some of the old folklore of the Far East there are mentions of remedies made with it much like I remember my mother used to give me when I had a sore throat a spoonful of treacle in hot water black treacle I don't know if anyone still uses that but I can assure you it's highly effective against coughing and a sore throat and so on Fowler's black treacle the balm seems to have been used in that way for some things to be taken internally but it seems that its main use was externally as an ointment of some kind and it seems to have been extremely effective in its ability to cure illness and infection there are many many references to that throughout the literature of the

Middle East but it's disappeared the balm that comes from the plants and the trees in Yemen does not seem to have the same properties as the balm that was found in Old Testament times one wonders why that is there's no clear answer to that except that perhaps the variety of tree that produced the balm of period has disappeared completely but it seems to have been a remedy for just about everything but Jeremiah is thinking not in the physical sense he's thinking in the spiritual sense is there no balm in Gilead is there no doctor no physician there is there no one that can come and put healing ointment on the daughter of my people in other words on the people of Judah why then and you notice that the question is in a sense a rhetorical question is there no balm in Gilead yes there is is there no physician there yes there is why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored why then and really what he's questioning is why has

God not brought healing to the people of Judah and Benjamin at this time why are they not being restored why are they not turning away from their idol worship something that maybe you and I still question why is it that so many people still pay no attention to the word of God compare how many are inside God's house this evening even just throughout our island even perhaps just throughout this village and how many are outside why is it that people are no longer responding to the call of the gospel it's the fault that we are not reaching out in the way that we should what does the Lord have a purpose in what he's doing

[25 : 31] I can't answer that question that's a question that would be of course God has a purpose in it but what his purpose is that's another thing altogether is there a time coming in which again the word of God would be taken away from our island and our land it's quite possible to see that if we look at the circumstances that are going on in our country that in another 20-30 years time the public worship of God may have virtually disappeared from our country it's a sad thing today God always maintains a remnant he maintained a remnant even in Israel and in Judah and in the captivity in Babylon and he will always bring a remnant back but in general terms of being the people of God it seems that things are changing quite considerably but the application really is for us individually and collectively it's there for us as a church but it's there particularly for us as individuals is there no balm in

Gilead for you and I when we are going through difficulties what does the balm signify well if you think of it this way the balm came from a tree and the tree had to be cut in order for the balm to flow is it not exactly the same way that healing comes from a tree from the cross of Christ where Christ had to be pierced in exactly the same way for the blood and the water to flow out and it is through the blood of Christ that healing is brought to you and I in our state of sin and misery in our state perhaps of backsliding in our state perhaps of idle worship the parallels are very very similar the balm was perhaps one of the most expensive if not the most expensive commodity to be found in the ancient world the blood of Christ is the most expensive thing that has ever been given think of what it cost for the blood of Christ to be shed on the cross that he would leave his estate in heaven that he would come down and go through thirty odd years of humiliation living among us as a human being we don't often consider the first thirty years of Christ probably because we know so little about it but think of it this way you remember at the death of

Lazarus as we see Jesus standing before the tomb of Lazarus that we come across you remember how he deliberately had not gone for four days we come across the shortest sentence in scripture Jesus wept why was he weeping he wasn't weeping for Lazarus he knew that he was going to resurrect Lazarus in a few minutes time but he was weeping for the effect of sin in bringing death and bringing spiritual death into the world and yet for 30 years 33 years if we include the three years of his ministry but for 30 years Jesus lived worked grew up walked talked with sinners and in sin every single day without sinning himself that's amazing absolutely amazing but how difficult it must have been for him before he began his ministry for the son of

God the perfect son of God to live among fallen human beings we don't often think of that and yet it must have been a constant sorrow to him to see what had happened through sin coming into the world to see what people were doing to see the sorrow the sadness the degradation the poverty the illness everything else that was going on round about and yet he still came he knew what he was coming to he knew in the plan that had been hatched before the foundation of the world the plan that possibly existed from all eternity we can't delve into these things as we would like to sometimes he knew that he would come to die so that you and

I might have redemption so that you and I might find this balm in Gilead that there would be a position there he knew what he was coming to and yet you remember the scene of Gethsemane as

he prayed with his sweat like great drops of blood falling on the ground father if it be thy will take this cup from me he knew as he was on the cross as he cried out my God my God why hast thou forsaken me and yet he still went through with it until he was able to say it is finished it is finished and that the balm of Gilead would then flow fully it doesn't come completely fully of course until after the ascension until Christ is taken back up into glory until the day of

[32 : 23] Pentecost and then the full balm of the Holy Spirit is poured out on God's people that's what the balm really means it really refers to the Holy Spirit the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives applied by the only physician Jesus Christ himself the great physician the one who can heal all heal is there no balm and Gilead still of course there is it's where you and I come when we are in difficulty when we are in trouble we come to God's word we come to the cross we come to find healing and yet many many times as the believer comes and struggles in prayer and comes to the Lord with his difficulties it seems like Jeremiah that he's finding no answer it seems that there is no balm and Gilead it seems that there is no physician there it's beautifully illustrated perhaps my poem

I'm sure many of you are familiar with my poem called it was really supposedly a dream footsteps in the sand which I'm sure many of you are familiar with and the man who is dreaming and looking back over his own life and he is a believer he's a Christian and as he looks back and he sees himself walking along the beach he sees himself walking and talking with the Lord and he sees that at various points in his journey through life that instead of there being two sets of footprints in the sand there is only one and he realizes that those were the most difficult times of his life and he turns to the Lord and he says to him Lord where were you when I was going through these difficult periods why were you not beside me why were you not walking beside me and the Lord turns to him and says to him ah my child it was then that I carried you you couldn't do it on your own it was then that I carried you that is how the balm of Gilead is applied so often to the Lord's people you don't know you don't perceive sometimes what God is doing in your life you know that his promises are true you know as Asaph says in Psalms 73 that he is continually holding you by your right hand that you are holding on to him you're holding on to his promises and yet it seems at times that you can't perceive the presence of God it seems at times that he's not giving you the answers that you want to hear all believers go through times like that times which very often are very troubling and very difficult to the child of

God the feeling that the Lord has left him is not with him but that God's silence does not mean that God's presence is not with you it depends of course what your own particular kind of suffering is very often the things that we class as difficulties and sufferings when we compare them to some of the difficulties and sufferings that others are going through are nothing are absolutely nothing when you consider your situation and compare it to the persecuted Christians in Eritrea in Pakistan being stoned for blaspheming against Hindu gods apparently or things like that put in prison in North Korea and executed or executed immediately even for being in possession of a Bible when you consider the poverty that certain

Christians live in parts of Asia parts of Africa and yet they still joy in the Lord when you consider those who are in prison those who have to worship secretly without perhaps even access to a Bible in their own languages you and I have a Bible in both our languages do we really appreciate the privileges that we have or do we just so often take them for granted and yet the things that you and I bring to the throne of grace in our prayers are they really important things or are they really just minor things so often we pray for things that we don't really need and we complain to God that he doesn't answer our prayers so often our prayers are for material things instead of being for spiritual things how often do we pray for the presence of the

[38 : 07] Lord's spirit being with us every day in what we do guiding us in every moment how often do we really come to worship the Lord in the true sense of the word worship to adore him adoration how often do we really come to worship when we come to the Lord's house and how often do we go out of the Lord's house with a sense of blessing blessing that we were there blessing that we understand perhaps a little more of God's word than we did when we came in blessing that we felt perhaps a little more of God's presence but above all blessing that we were able to come and worship with a joyful heart whatever our circumstances there is still balm in

Gilead for the believer and when the believer is in real difficulties in difficulties of health etc whatever it is to this balm that he turns it is to the promises of God's word and as we get older and look ahead and see as our health begins to pale in old and further years as we begin to break down

isn't it the thing that more and more we hold on to the glorious promises given in God's word of how we will be with them forever but you see too many people assume that they will reach old age comfortably there is no guarantee of that although we are living longer yet more and more are dying younger especially if you look at it statistically in world towns we are privileged in our country and perhaps in our island with the standard of living and the standard of health that we have and yet we don't often think of it that way we are privileged with the weather conditions you might be surprised to hear me say that and think here what an awful summer we have yes but by whose standards other parts of the world are crying out from rain yeah maybe we have got a little too much of it but nevertheless wouldn't they be so glad of it in some parts of the USA and many parts of Africa where they are undergoing droughts where the failure of a crop can mean starvation and poverty and death when we compare our comfortable situation to the situation of others haven't we so much to be thankful for and to be reminded constantly that there is bound and guilt that whatever your situation whatever your difficulty whatever your sufferings whatever your fears the Lord is letting you down that the Lord is abandoning you that the Lord is not answering your prayers as you want there is still bound in Joliet there is still a physician who can come every single day through the presence of his spirit and uphold you and strengthen you and comfort you isn't that what God's word and God promises in the Psalms that we have been singing are all about how the Psalm writers found such comfort wasn't that Asaph's struggle in Psalm 73 as he saw the prosperity of those round about him and yet it seemed to him that everything he was doing was worth nothing until he realised the end of the foolish and then he realises that he is God is continually with him upholding him day by day isn't that the way it is so often with you and me we complain about such unimportant things and yet when we turn to the word of God that we see so often that it is the Lord who is providing for us the Lord who is upholding us the Lord who is strengthening us day by day that he is guiding us and very often perhaps even chastising us as he teaches us things that we need to know things that we need to learn so often we come across that in scripture it is the same way as a parent teaches a child through gentle chastisement not in anger but in love and as it is done in love the child learns that the chastisement is for his own benefit isn't it the same way with you and

I that the Lord teaches us through the circumstances through the experiences through the sufferings that we have to depend alone on him to draw closer to him to come to the cross daily and to leave our burden there whatever circumstances you are in whatever difficulties you have the word of God is so comforting to us there is still the ban from Gilead oh it was expensive it was brought from the wealthiness brought into the land from the wealthiness and you remember that Jesus himself in the first days of his ministry in his temptation that the temptation took place on the wilderness whether it was from the same worldliness as Gilead we don't know but it is from the wilderness that healing comes and it is from this great position that the great healer will pour out his blessing upon his people but you and I have to trust implicitly in the finished work of [44 : 30] Calvary in order not only to receive this ban it's one thing to apply a medicine it's another thing for the medicine to have effect but the promises of God's word will always have an effect on his people are you familiar this evening with the balm of Gilead are you familiar with the great position that is where your physical and your spiritual healing will come from and where you will find peace and joy in whatever circumstances you are in let us pray oh lord we thank you for your word this evening that there is still a balm and Gilead that there is still a physician there who is able to bind up the wounds of his people to help them and to bring them to a saving knowledge of themselves that you are able to comfort your people at all times and to uphold and to give strength to go through whatever trials and tribulations we must face in this world for you have told us to be of good cheer for you have overcome the world we thank you for these words of comfort that we are given in your holy scriptures be with us this evening and bless it to us and pardon our sins through Christ

Jesus let us conclude our worship by singing in sing psalm psalm 23 the famous psalm of comfort that we are given sing psalm 23 page 28 the lord is my shepherd no want shall I go he makes me lie down where the green pastures grow he leads me to rest where the calm waters grow and if you think of so long in David's experience the amount of suffering he went through under the persecution of psalm before God's promises were fulfilled to him and yet he could write this psalm and particularly in verse 5 in the sight of my enemies a table you smite the oil of rejoicing you pour on my head my cup overflows and isn't that your situation and my situation today that our cup

overflows and were generously made so surely your covenant mercy and grace will follow me closely in all of my ways

I will dwell in the house of the Lord all my days let us sing the whole sound into God's praise the Lord is my shepherd no one child he makes me light on where the green must be true he leads me to rest where the calm waters go my wandering steps he brings back to his way his strength but so precious best making me to and this he has done his great danger to display all

I wanted that smiley where darkness is near because you are with me glory are like here you all the news that bring me a heart and cheer in the sight of the peace of heaven you spread the oil of rejoicing you fall on my head like the world rose and that graciously pray for surely the covenant and mercy and grace will follow me closely in all of my ways

I will dwell in the hands of the Lord on my day grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to be with you all now and forever Amen