
Medicine for the soul

Eifion Evans

One aspect of salvation is the restoration of spiritual health to the soul. It is one meaning of the word salvation, in words used in both Old and New Testaments. Using the health of the body as an analogy, the soul's deliverance from its diseased state because of sin, its health in godliness, and perfect prosperity in glory, may therefore be spoken of as a spiritual healing. This article is an attempt to explore further this understanding, and to draw from it some timely application for today in the realms of public worship and personal experience.

We begin by affirming that the soul's salvation, the true medicine for the recovery of the soul, is Christ alone. Calvin does as much in his *Institutes* by quoting Bernard to this purpose: 'The name of Jesus is not only light, but also food; it is also oil, without which all food of the soul is dry; it is salt, without whose seasoning whatever is set before us is insipid; finally, it is honey in the mouth, melody in the ear, rejoicing in the heart, and at the same time medicine. Every discourse in which His name is not spoken is without savour.' (II. xvi.1). Christ's propitiation for our sin, Calvin urges in a sermon on Isaiah 53:4-6, is the only ground for the soul's healing: 'we must come to our Lord Jesus Christ, who was willing to be disfigured from the top of His head even to the sole of His feet and was a mass of wounds, flogged with many stripes and crowned with thorns, nailed and fastened to the cross and pierced through the side. This is how we are healed; here is our true medicine, with which we must be content, and which we must embrace whole-heartedly, knowing that otherwise we can never have inward peace, but must always be tormented and tortured to the extreme, unless Jesus Christ comforts us and appeases God's wrath against us.' (1956, p 75)

While the remedy is divinely sourced and vicariously procured, it must be personally appropriated. Listen to Paul Gerhardt in 1651 singing about it in a not so well-known verse of the hymn 'All my heart this night rejoices' (*Lyra Germanica* [1879 edn] Part II pp 14-15) :

Hither come, ye heavy-hearted,
Who for sin, deep within,
Long and sore have smarted;
For the poisoned wounds you're feeling
Help is near, One is here
Mighty for their healing.

This divine remedy is even more vividly portrayed by William Williams in a verse from his long poem *Theomemphus*, written in 1764 (Eifion Evans, *Daniel Rowland*, 1985, pp. 377-8; and see *Pursued By God*, 1996, p 91) :

He came to heal the wounded,
Being wounded in their stead;
The heir of heaven was pierced
For those through sin made dead;
He sucked the awful poison

The serpent gave to me,
And from that deadly venom
He died on Calvary.

To this insight there are two practical implications. First, it means that the offer of a remedy can only be effectively made when the disease is exposed. The sinner's grasp of salvation is only convincing when there is an awareness of the danger of sin. Thus the right way of preaching, according to the Puritan George Swinnock, was to 'use the needle of the law to make way for the thread of the Gospel.' (*Works*.vol. i. 1992, p 326) Secondly, there should be a realisation that preaching falls short of its aim if there is no application made directly to the conscience. 'The right way to go to heaven is to sail by hell', said the English Reformer John Bradford. (quoted in Ian Brewer (ed.), *William Perkins*, 1970, pp 26-7.) An understanding of the Gospel remedy, however clear, will not save, unless there is a personal appropriation of the medicine. The Gospel call is to flee from wrath as well as to accept its reality, to seek God's kingdom and righteousness as well as to admire them. In this respect, the Puritans have much to teach us, as James I Packer comments, 'Truths obeyed, said the Puritans, will *heal*... All Christians need Scripture truth as medicine for their souls at every stage, and the making and accepting of applications is the administering and swallowing of it.' (*Among God's Giants*, 1991, p 85.)

So much for the soul's initial healing; what of its continued health? Inner corruption, outward trials, the opposition of the devil, the deceitfulness of this world are all injurious to the soul's health. 'Let every [one] of us mark to what vice he is inclined,' says John Calvin, 'that he may seek the remedy of it, as some be given to one affection, and some to another. And so when we once know our diseases, let us apply the fit medicine unto them. In God's Word we shall find enough of them wherewith to heal and cure us, so we be willing to use the good that is offered us there.' (Sermon on Deuteronomy 11:16-21, 1987, 473.b.22,ff.) In recommending a thorough acquaintance with the Psalms, Calvin urges in his 'Preface' that 'it is by perusing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure.'

For careful, godly living much depends on knowing our own flawed hearts, as well as on God's faithful dealings with His people. In this respect, Reformed and Puritan preachers exercised a pastoral as well as a prophetic ministry though their pulpit labours. Even a cursory glance at Puritan sermons will provide a picture of thorough, soul-searching, conscience-disturbing 'uses', 'exhortations', and 'applications'. God's people are to be brought by such means to an ever deeper work of grace in their hearts, to closer communion with God, to nearer resemblance to Christ. Another feature of the Puritan period was its casuistry, the method of resolving cases of conscience, for the same purpose. The most familiar and comprehensive example of this is Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory*.

The Methodists took this ministry a step further by their 'fellowship meetings', believing that they should be soul-physicians as well as teachers. Their close examination of the soul's state, and expertise in prescribing the appropriate remedy is illustrated by William Williams's description of the ideal counsellor. He is one who 'perceives what particular sin it is that keeps the man away from God; he can seek out those dark dens, where lurk sin and Satan, fleshly lusts and the lust of the world and its

idols. In the same way as a fisherman knows where the fish are, and the mole-catcher the runs of the moles, and the fowler where to find the partridge, so does the expert counsellor recognize the cause of every fall, so does he recognize the secret ways of the temptations of the world and of the flesh, and know of all the twists and turns of human nature.' (*The Experience Meeting*, translated by Mrs Lloyd-Jones, 1973, p 32.) By such means were they brought to strive for and expect an intimate, lively walk with God, expressed by Charles Wesley in the hymn 'Thou hidden source of calm repose':

Jesus, my all in all Thou art,
My rest in toil, my ease in pain,
The medicine of my broken heart,
In war my peace, in loss my gain;
My smile beneath the tyrant's frown,
In shame my glory and my crown.

How starkly contrasting is such profound piety to what pass today as quick remedies for the ailments of believers! It is true that biblical methods and biblical remedies are not easily mastered or practiced. But for those who truly believe in the sufficiency and effectiveness of God's Word written, other, lesser remedies are recognised as harmful and spurious substitutes.

God's therapeutic activity for His people's health, however, is not confined to preaching and pastoral counsel. The great realm of providence is also the theatre of His sovereign, healing recovery of His people, as Job 5:18 makes clear: 'He bruises, but He binds up; He wounds, but His hands make whole.' On this passage Calvin comments: 'when we have found how our nature is inclined to all evil, let us confess ourselves to have need that God should use some sharp punishment to purge us withal, as we see physicians do, who now and then put some poison in medicines, after that they see the maladies to be great and deep-rooted.' (Sermons, 1993, 96.a.56) Preaching on Job 33:18-25, he says,

... let us learn to bear our afflictions patiently, since we see that they serve us for medicines and salves... let us not think it strange that God should increase His stripes. If He see that we cannot be won, but that there is such a sturdyness in us as He must be fain to correct us a long while, it behoveth Him to work more roughly. Like as when a disease is rooted, peradventure the diseased person will think himself to be rid of it as soon as he hath taken some syrup or some pill, or hath been let blood... but the root of the disease is not yet plucked up and therefore he must be fain to take some very harsh and bitter medicines, and be kept to a diet, and abide under the Physician's hand a month or two, yea or a whole year. Even after some manner must God purge us by diverse remedies and make it long ere he cure us, because this vice of pride is rooted overdeeply in us, and is entered even into the marrow of our bones, so that all is infected, and there is no soundness in us, but all is corrupted till God renew it again. (588.a.7; 589.a.48,ff.)

Such settled conviction of the therapeutic effect of adversity stem from an unquestioned belief in a heavenly Father's omniscience and sovereign disposal of all things for the good of His people. Some afflictions are warnings from God, intended to bring His child to submission, as Calvin observes in his sermon on Deuteronomy 31:17,ff. (1092.b.22,ff.): 'it is God's hand that smiteth us...if men could skill to profit

themselves by the afflictions that are sent them, they be all of them as medicines, and God's intent is to show Himself a father by warning them after that manner.' Others are Satan's buffetings, under God's control and for His sanctifying purpose in the believer's life: 'So then, when God giveth Satan leave to tempt faithful ones: ordinarily it is to make them to be served therewith as with medicine. And herein we see God's marvellous goodness, how He turneth the evil into good. For what can Satan bring but rank poison and vermin...? We see then how God turneth the evil into good, when He maketh all Satan's stings to serve as medicines, whereby He purgeth us of the vices that lie hid in us.' (John Calvin's sermon on Job 1:9-12, 23.a.3,ff., 47.) Thomas Manton summarises such dealings by saying that God's 'chastisements are purgative medicines, to prevent or cure some spiritual disease.' (Sermon on Psalm 119:50, vol. i, 1990, p. 489.) In the believer's daily experience of trial and triumph, of storm and sunshine, God's medicine is not always self-evident, and he constantly needs to have faith quickened and exercised upon the unchangeableness of God.

But God's providence is distinguishing as well as mysterious, as Samuel Bolton reminds his readers in *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, (1964, p. 25): 'Afflictions upon wicked men are penal, a part of the curse; there is nothing medicinal in them; they are the effects of vindictive justice and not of Fatherly mercy. But afflictions which come upon the godly are medicinal in purpose, and are intended to cure them of sin.' They are also distinguishing when applied to God's people, witness the section titled 'The cross as medicine' in Calvin's *Institutes* [in the sense of cross-bearing]: '... the Lord himself, according as He sees it expedient, comforts us and subjects and restrains our unrestrained flesh with the remedy of the cross. And this He does in various ways, in accordance with what is healthful for each man. For not all of us suffer in equal degree from the same diseases, or, on that account, need the same harsh cure. From this it is to be seen that some are tried by one kind of cross, others by another. But since the heavenly physician treats some more gently but cleanses others by harsher remedies, while he wills to provide for the health of all, yet he leaves no one free and untouched, because he knows that all, to a man, are diseased.' (III.viii.5.) With this in mind, even brotherly reproof can be borne as beneficial, as George Whitefield's future wife says to Howel Harris, 'Smite home, for I find that the bitterest physic makes the safest cure.' (*Presbyterian Church of Wales Historical Journal*, Manuscript Supplement, ii.70 [March 1952]). For the believer, it is Christ's endurance of suffering which motivates his submission under adversity. John Owen, in a chapter on 'The filth of sin purged by the Spirit and blood of Christ', can say that the 'tree of the cross being cast into the waters of affliction hath rendered them wholesome and medicinal.' (*Works*, vol. iii, 1988, p 447.)

With such assurance of God's unremitting determination to conform us to the image of His Son in holiness, the believer can sing with sincerity and conviction John Newton's hymn, 'Begone, unbelief':

Since all that I meet
 Shall work for my good.
 The bitter is sweet
 The medicine is food;
 Though painful at present
 'Twill cease before long;

And then, O how pleasant
The conqueror's song.

Spurgeon speaks for us, too, in his comments on Psalm 91:9-10 (*The Treasury of David*): 'It is impossible that any ill should happen to the man who is beloved of the Lord; the most crushing calamities can only shorten his journey and hasten him to his reward. Ill to him is no ill, but only good in a mysterious form. Losses enrich him, sickness is his medicine, reproach is his honour, death is his gain.' And the subjective experience of a child of God finds expression in the hymn, 'Whate'er my God ordains is right' by Samuel Rodigast:

Whate'er my God ordains is right,
He taketh thought for me;
The cup that my Physician gives
No poisoned draught can be,
But medicine due; For God is true,
And on that changeless truth I build,
And all my heart with hope is filled.

(*Lyra Germanica*, 1879, Pt II. pp. 196-7.)

John Bradford, the English Reformer and martyr, shall have the last word for us on the matter, advising us 'Against the fear of death', the last enemy: 'According to this ... do thou judge of death, and thou shalt thus be not afraid of it, but desire it as a most wholesome medicine, and a friendly messenger of the Lord's justice and mercy.' (*Writings*, vol. i, 1979, p. 345.)

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the Sovereignty of Grace in the Lives of Flawed Saints', that is so helpful for those of us in pastoral ministry. How we need reminding that in spite of faults and failings our sovereign God can use us for his glory. **James McGoldrick's** biography of Abraham Kuyper, *God's Renaissance Man* (Evangelical Press 2000), reminds us of one man's vision of seeing God glorified in every area of life. While containing much about Kuyper's life this book is really less a biography and more an exposition of Kuyper's Reformed Christian theology and world-view. McGoldrick is not uncritical of some points in Kuyper's theology, but nevertheless helpfully shows us the breadth, depth and relevance of his thinking for Christians today. This is a very good introduction to this remarkable Christian. Finally, **Geraint Fielder's** *Grace, Grit and Gumption* (Bryntirion 2000) is a delightful and moving account of the lives and ministries of John Pugh and Frank and Seth Joshua in late 19th and early 20th century Wales. The title is taken from a letter by Seth Joshua and summarises the spirit of these men and what is needed in preachers today. This book gives us an insight into the Welsh Revival, but even more is a reminder of what God can do in urban areas. Our culture is today even more secularised than the industrialised towns of South Wales in 1905, but the God of Pugh and the Joshua brothers is our God and our prayer is that he would pour out his Spirit on the dry ground of 21st century Britain. The those pastors who have gone out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.
