

## There Is A Balm In Gilead | Ephesians 5:15-21 | October 2, 2016

Petersen, William and Ardythe, Hymns, Inspiring Stories About 600 Hymns and Praise Songs, (Tyndale, 2006).

What is a “balm in Gilead”?

In Genesis the story of Joseph is told. Joseph’s brothers beat him up and threw him into a pit. Then they sold him to a caravan passing through. The merchants were traveling from Gilead to Egypt with spices, balms, and myrrh. Gilead, the area just east of the Jordan near Galilee, was famous for its medicinal balms.

Later on in the Old Testament, we read of Jeremiah crying out for the healing of his people. “Is there no balm in Gilead?” he asks (8:22, NIV). He was looking for a cure for Israel in Gilead but he found none. It would be like going to the local drugstore and finding no medicine to treat your illness. Of course, the problem that Israel had was not a physical ailment but a spiritual one. The disease was sin. We all suffer from a “sin-sick soul.” We are unable to live righteous lives in our own strength. This is the human condition.

Fortunately, this song answers Jeremiah’s question with a resounding yes. There is a balm in Gilead, and it is found in the simple truth that Jesus died for all, and that he alone can heal the soul sick with sin. Jesus himself is the balm of Gilead. 318

*Sometimes I feel discouraged, And think my work’s in vain,  
But then the Holy Spirit Revives my soul again.*

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole  
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

NOTES: Balm in Gilead = a spiritual medicine. A song with unknown origins; probably written in the nineteenth century. The theme of this song hovers over the wounded soul with comfort, encouragement and healing – much like the **paraclete** the Comforter – Holy Spirit.

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another **Helper [Comforter, Advocate, Counselor]**, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. *John 14:16-17*

But when the **Helper** comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, he will bear witness about me. *John 15:26*

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the **Helper** will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment... *John 16:7*

## Helper/Comforter/Counselor - *Parakletos*

### Lexicon

In the few places where the word is found in pre-Christian and extra-Christian literature as well it has for the most part a more general sense: **one who appears in another's behalf, mediator, intercessor, helper...** In 1 John 2:1 Christ is designated as *parakletos*... It is the Holy Spirit that is expressly called Helper in the Fourth Gospel: 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7. 766 [NOTE: only references found in NT]

### **Holy Spirit = *Hagios Pneuma***

Steven Guthrei, **Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human**, (Baker Academic, 2011).

One of the principal works of the Holy Spirit is to make and remake our humanity. In creation, incarnation, and redemption, the Holy Spirit is *the humanizing Spirit*. In creation, the Spirit is the Breath of God that animates the dust of the ground and creates a living human being. Similarly, in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is *the incarnating Spirit*. It is by the Spirit that the eternal Word of God becomes truly and fully human. The Spirit likewise rests upon and empowers the humanity of Jesus, and so we call him the Christ, the Messiah—that is, the one anointed with the Spirit. Finally, in the work of redemption and consummation, the Holy Spirit is *the re-humanizing Spirit*. The Spirit is poured out on God's people, so that by the Spirit they may become truly and fully human, recreated in the Image of the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ. Xvi

The very name "Spirit" (*Ruach* in Hebrew; *Pneuma* in Greek) has an element of uncharted wildness about it. The words *ruach* and *pneuma* mean not only "spirit," but also "breath" or "wind." *Spirit*, then, is a word that suggests movement, and movement of an organic (rather than a mechanically regular) sort. 8

The Spirit comes roaring in—unexpected, irresistible, and with extraordinary effect. These pneumatic traits of movement, power, and spontaneity mark the work of the Spirit throughout the New Testament. Throughout the New Testament the Spirit drives the church along like a skiff out ahead of a gale, scuttering across geographical, social, and racial boundaries, out into uncharted waters. 9

When we recognize the Spirit as the *ruach*—the breath, the wind—of God, it is right that we should be put in mind of the wild, uncharted regions of which we can say little. When we remember that the Spirit is the *ruach*, we remember to be humble before a sovereign God, whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts and whose ways are higher than our ways. We remember that while we may hold doctrines, our doctrines don't hold God—neither controlling him nor containing all there is of him. If we were to describe all of this in terms other than *mystery* and *ineffability*, we might say that the work of the Spirit is characterized by dynamism. The Spirit is active and agile; the Spirit moves. 10-11

The Spirit's distinctive work is to make God's revelatory work in Christ actual and effective. The metaphors of fountain, river, and drink make clear that Athanasius [Fourth century Church Father] is talking about an image of intimacy, nourishment, and life; it is knowledge set in motion toward the one known. By the Spirit, we are given the knowledge that enables us to respond, to drink, to actively participate in the life of God. Athanasius' theology of the Spirit can comfortably accommodate both knowledge and mystery because it is built on a broader foundation of participation, worship, and love. 14

The life of the Spirit arises in love and culminates in participation, and the route along which we travel the spiritual life is neither that of blind mystery nor dogmatic knowledge, but of worship. We know the Spirit in and through response and adoration... It is here, in fact—in worship, in adoration—that we find a far richer resemblance between art and spirituality; not in ineffability understood simplistically as “not-knowing,” but in a movement that arises from love, is carried along in worship, and finds fulfillment in participation. 15-16

The goal toward which the Spirit carries us is not numinous silence but the ecstatic speech of Pentecost, not simply standing in wordless awe over the unknowable depths but kneeling down at the spring *to drink*. We account for the ineffability of biblical *Spirit-uality* not by denying but by insisting that the Spirit also invites us to *speak*. *Spirit-uality* may be described as ineffable not only because of the Spirit-Wind who rushes in unexpectedly, but also and precisely *because* of the Spirit-Breath who brings word and speech. The Spirit's ineffability is not the refusal of words. Quite the opposite. It is an invitation and an enabling by which we speak and respond. 20

There is in fact a deep and intimate connection between *Spirit-uality* (the work of God's Holy Spirit) and our own deepest and truest humanity. We might even say that the Holy Spirit is the humanizing Spirit, the breath of God that transforms dust into a living soul. The work of the Holy Spirit is to fulfill, complete, create, and re-create our humanity, remaking us after the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ. 34-35

Humankind was originally created by God to be filled with the breath of God. The dust is made to be the dwelling of God's radiant glory. Now this broken race is being re-created in Jesus—the prototype and pioneer of a brand new humanity. 40-41

Gordon Fee, **God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul**, (Hendrickson, 1994).

The Spirit is God's way of being present, powerfully present, in our lives and communities as we await the consummation of the kingdom of God... for Paul, the Spirit was an *experienced* reality. Xxi

And **do not get drunk** with wine, for that is debauchery, but **be filled** with the Spirit.  
*Ephesians 5:18*

NOTE: Both “do not get drunk” and “be filled” are imperative verbs – meaning verbs of command.

This imperative [“be filled”] is not just another in a long string: rather, it is the key to all the others [in the preceding context]. But having said that, in terms of Paul’s interests, one can scarcely miss the richness of this metaphor. First of all, it is merely another way, a more powerfully metaphorical way to be sure, of repeating Paul’s basic imperative found in Gal 5:16: “Walk in/by the Spirit.” All truly Christian behavior is the result of being Spirit people, people filled with the Spirit of God, who live by the Spirit and walk by the Spirit. The richness of the metaphor comes in part from its contrast to being drunken with wine and in part from the verb “be filled.” Together they do not picture a person who is “drunk on the Spirit,” as it were, as if there were virtue in that, but a person—and in this case, a community!—whose life is so totally given over to the Spirit that the life and deeds of the Spirit are as obvious in their case as the effects of too much wine are obvious in that other. 721

The actual expression of the imperative is unusual: Paul says not, “be full of the Spirit,” as though one were full of Spirit in the same way that another is full of wine, but “be filled by the Spirit,” with the emphasis on being filled to the full by the Spirit’s presence. Very likely Paul is recalling the final purpose clause in the prayer of 3:14-19, that they be empowered by the Spirit so that as Christ thus dwells in them by the Spirit they come to be “filled unto the fullness of God” himself. Here, then, is the ultimate imperative in the Pauline corpus: God’s people so filled by/with the Spirit’s own presence that they come to know God in all his fullness and reflect such in the way they live in relationship to one another and to God himself. 721-722

That leads, then, to note finally that one misses too much if this text is completely individualized, as so often happens. True, as with all such moments, the imperative can be responded to only by individuals; and here, indeed, is a great need in the contemporary church, for God’s people individually to take this imperative with all seriousness. But in its immediate context the imperative has to do with community life. Here, perhaps, is an even greater need—that God’s people collectively be so “full of God” by his Spirit that our worship and our homes give full evidence of the Spirit’s presence: by song, praise, and thanksgiving that simultaneously praise and adore God and teach the community, and by the kind of submission of ourselves to one another in which the concern is not “who’s in charge around here,” but how to love in the family as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. 722