



3:13 KJV]—and the only thing Jesus ever harmed” [Jesus cursed a fig tree and it died, Mark 11:12-14, 20-21]. Dr. Sleeth also points out that a tree is part of the symbolism of the Trinity: the dove (Holy Spirit), rainbow (God) and olive leaf (Jesus). And lastly, trees represent the promise of life after death since they continue to grow new shoots even if they are cut down (Job 14:7). I highly recommend this book to help us see the Bible from a fresh, new perspective.

Despite concerns about COVID-19 prompting people to avoid exposure by remaining indoors, I hope that everyone can make time to go outside (while maintaining a safe distance if you are hiking with others) and walk among the trees, reflecting on how they represent our Heavenly Father. As Dr. Sleeth states: “the hidden language of trees” is expressed throughout the Bible. Now, when I go for a hike in the woods with my massive supply of Flonase and Kleenex, I smile and think about my earthly father and my Heavenly Father, and how much they both love me and trees.

Christianity and Healing: Asclepius, Hygeia, and the Christian Pharmacist

By Rachel Senn, Dwight Davis, and Daniel Spadaro

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. Whoever has

ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.” (Revelation 2:12-17, NIV)

This strongly worded letter to the Pergamum Church warns them to hold fast to the truth and repent from their sin of tolerating society’s idolatry. What idolatry was being tolerated by the Christians in Pergamum, and are we as Christian pharmacists tolerating similar idolatry today?

First-century Pergamum

The ancient city of Pergamum (also

known as Pergamon) was a hub of learning and business as well as religious activities. Pergamum had a library that was second only to the one in Alexandria. Their invention of parchment as an alternative to papyrus allowed documents to be kept for long periods of time, increasing the amount of information stored in the city.¹

Pergamum also held a large Asklepeion, or healing center, that drew people from all over the ancient world. Asclepius, the Greek demi-god of healing, was symbolized by a man with a snake wrapped around his staff, known as the Rod of Asclepius (see figure 1).² This healing center was also a temple and place of worship for this pagan god. The physician Galen (129-199 A.D.) was born in Pergamum

and worked at the Askleion for a time. He was known for his advancements in medicine, particularly in the field of surgery, and his methods of hygiene during and after surgery were key to his success. One writer says, “During the second century A.D., Pergamon’s fame as a center of healing and medical science eclipsed its reputation for anything else. Its most celebrated citizen during this period was the physician Galen, whose work and research was largely responsible for providing the foundation from which modern western medicine was to spring.”³

The healing center was built around a spring and has been described as a cross between a hospital and a “mud spa.” Patients would enter the complex and on their first night be instructed to sleep in rooms where non-venomous snakes would be released to crawl around and over their bodies. These snakes were believed to be messengers of Asclepius and were to bring dreams to the patients that would be later analyzed by priests to determine the proper method of treatment. After the initial “dream diagnosis,” the patients would undergo regimens that would range from surgery, to herbal remedies, to spa-like baths.⁴

The Askleion at Pergamum was empire-renown from the days of the Ancient Greeks well into the rule of the Romans. Pilgrims traveled from far and wide to be healed at the temple; however, the success numbers were skewed. Reportedly, there was an inscription over the entrance that said, “There is no death here.” The priests would not allow any terminal patients to enter, only those who they believed would be healed.⁵

It is interesting to note what has been dubbed “medical pluralism” in the Ancient Greek and Roman culture. On one hand there is the physician Galen, whose scientific knowledge and surgical skill laid the foundation for modern medicine. On the other is

society’s religious system that caused them to seek help from deities and supernatural powers when they could not provide a cure on their own. While our current culture tries to separate spirituality and science, this ancient people held these two ideologies very closely together without any apparent difficulty.⁴

Hygeia, the daughter of Asclepius, was known as the goddess of sanitation and cleanliness, and has ties to medicine as a remedy for disease. Her sisters, Panacea and Remedy, other daughters of Asclepius, were also aides to the god of healing. Typically represented as a young woman feeding a serpent from a bowl, Hygeia



Figure 1

was worshiped for her ability to help her father heal through hygiene and medicine. Hygeia’s bowl has been used as a symbol for pharmacy for centuries, mirroring the Rod of Asclepius used to denote medicine (see figure 2).⁶ She was also worshipped at the Askleion in Pergamum, yet another deity that claimed the power to heal.^{7,8}

Jesus’ Healing

This secular healing culture was a stark contrast to the ministry of Jesus barely a hundred years before. The Greek gods offered supernatural healing from any disease or ailment; Jesus came preaching repentance and the coming of the kingdom of God. His healing power was not the primary focus of His ministry. Pergamum was a city of learning and intellect, proud of their library and scholastic achievements; Jesus was a lowly carpenter from Nazareth, with no formal education or training. The priests at the Askleion turned patients away whom they assessed as terminal, but Jesus never withdrew from those who sought Him. In fact, He welcomed all with great compassion. Pergamum healed by sorcery and science; Jesus healed by the very power of God. At best, the Askleion in Pergamum only extended the physical lives of its patients. It addressed only their medical problems, never recognizing their true and deepest problem: spiritual death and separation from God.

This passage from the Gospel of Matthew shows our Savior’s heart for people to know true healing: “Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!” Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, “Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the paralyzed man, “Get up, take your mat and go home.” Then the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man” (Matthew 9:2-8, NIV). Jesus cared for this man’s soul before He cared for His physical body. Forgiveness from sin is far more important than physical

healing because spiritual death is eternal.

Jesus' Letter to the Pergamum Church

To the church in Pergamum, this very same Jesus now writes a letter of warning and exhortation. He recognizes they are in great danger from false teaching and the culture they live in, but He also calls them to live as redeemed people who have the Holy Spirit residing in them. They have been called out of darkness and into the light of salvation and are to live accordingly. No more are they to look to the temple on the hill for power and healing, but to their risen Savior who has conquered death for all time.

In Revelation 2:13 Jesus mentions Satan and his throne or dwelling place. There is debate as to the exact meaning of this phrase because Pergamum not only held the great Asklepiion but also temples to Zeus and the Roman emperor. While the exact meaning is unsure, there was undoubtedly pagan influence in the city. It can be surmised there was a throne to Satan at every turn. How ominous indeed that the symbol of Asclepius' power is a snake.⁹

Yet the fault of the church at Pergamum was toleration of evil deeds, rather than open participation. From Numbers 24, Balaam the prophet was called by the king of Midian to curse the Israelites. However, the curse failed every time he tried. The Lord turned Balaam's words from cursing to blessing. In the end, the way the Midianites were able to attack Israel was by seducing them to come and worship their gods. The Israelites, like the church in Pergamum, were tempted to turn back to an immoral culture rather than follow the living and true God.

In this letter to the church, Jesus is saying they cannot have their pagan culture and Christ at the same time. He calls them to repent of their idolatry, or else He will come with His judgment

upon them. As John MacArthur says in his sermon on this passage, "Pergamum was not only in danger from the world, but Pergamum was in more danger from the Lord for not separating from the world. Disaster and danger was all around them in the culture, but disaster and danger loomed over them from heaven...this is a letter of judgment on a worldly



Figure 2

church, a church that would not separate itself from that culture from which it had been redeemed."¹⁰

Application For Christian Pharmacists

One temptation for the believers in Pergamum could have been their access to knowledge and information. Are we tempted to rely only on secular philosophy and science to solve problems in our lives, or do we turn to the Lord in prayer for difficulties and decisions we may face? Do we tolerate sin in order to be respected and liked by those around us? Are there areas where we have compromised Biblical truths to gain approval in the workplace? Are we tolerating the "teachings of Balaam" by not addressing sin as Jesus would? As

Christian pharmacists, in what ways are we tempted to follow our culture rather than follow the example of our Great Healer and Savior?

It is easy to approach patient care as though God does not exist. Modern technology has allowed us great precision in diagnosing and treating ailments and diseases. As Christians, we know that our intellect and ability to use and create these advancements are gifts from the Lord. Recognizing this, our lives ought to be filled with thanksgiving and praise to our Great Creator, as well as joyful amazement of His love and care for us.

While in the workplace, we are obligated to work hard as unto the Lord and not for men. Therefore, we need to be sure that our reputation is characteristic of one who works hard and with integrity. We should desire respect and honor for diligent work. But while we are to live in the world, we are not to be of the world or participating in its evil deeds. We need to examine our own lifestyle and see if there are ways we have compromised in our speech, thoughts, or actions, and are not living lives pleasing to God.

As healthcare professionals, we are given the opportunity to follow the example of Christ in a unique and exciting way. Jesus was a healer, and He could change people's lives with just a touch. But Jesus wanted so much more for those He touched than just physical healing. He wanted them to have a relationship with their heavenly Father. Even as He healed the lame and the blind, He offered an even greater remedy: forgiveness of sin. We cannot forget this goal of our Master in the busy lives we lead. To focus exclusively on a person's physical body would be to give care as did the priests of Pergamum. Do we solely think of physical healing, and never really grasp that our patients' greatest need is for spiritual healing? We are called to be different than secular pharmacists.

Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic for over 50 years, puts it so well: "To me, physical healing had always been the big deal, but to God, my soul was a much bigger deal. And that's when I began searching for a deeper healing, not just a physical healing, although I was still praying for such. I asked for a deeper healing, a Psalm 139, 'Search me, O God, and try my heart, test me and see if there be some wicked way in me.' Cleanse me from every sin and set me free."¹¹

In ancient Greece and Rome, healing was intricately connected with religion and the spiritual realm. Our modern society, however, has tried to separate anything religious from medicine. While we no longer treat our patients by placing them in a room and allowing snakes to crawl over them, we should take a moment to reflect on our Savior's goal for a person's healing. What outcome should be the most important to us? Health or holiness?

Do we only accept the people whom we know will be "healed," or do we extend care to all people? Do we treat all people with equal care and concern, or do we have our "favorite patients" who receive more attention either because of wealth or status or personality? Christian pharmacists are called to be a part of the mission of saving souls. We must point them to another symbol of a snake on a pole – not the Greek gods of health, but the Savior of the world: "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" (John 3:14-15, NIV). Our message is simple: we were created by a holy God and we sinned against Him, bringing upon ourselves eternal death and punishment. There was no way for us to be reconciled to God until He sent His very own Son, Jesus, into the world to live a sinless life for us and to die a gruesome death in our place. After three days in a tomb, Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven where He now sits at the right hand of God,

interceding for those who will believe. Those who will repent of their sin and by faith believe will inherit eternal life; true and complete spiritual healing. Complete Biblical healing involves more than regulating blood pressure or blood sugar to a healthy goal. Although physical health is important, it is not the ultimate goal.

The great challenge for us as believers is to use our talents and abilities for Jesus. We can meet this daily challenge by having a gospel conversation with someone, or praying for the person whose prescription we are filling. We may be able to speak truths of Scripture or extend a kind smile to the next person who walks into our pharmacy. No matter how big or small, we need to remember that our calling is far beyond filling prescriptions and correcting medication orders; we are employed by the King of Kings to represent His name to the world. Let every moment be lived in service for His kingdom and glory.

CONCLUSION

Let us not lose heart in doing what is good. We need to examine ourselves to see if we are tolerating idolatry, because we have a call to honor the Lord and extend His love to every person we encounter. This is a high calling, but we cannot forget the immense reward awaiting us.

We must not overlook what our Lord states at the end of this message to a wayward church: "To the one who is victorious... I will give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it." In ancient tradition, a white stone was given to those who won sporting events. This stone was their "ticket" to get into the celebration banquet for the victors held at the end of the sporting tournament. Not only does Jesus offer a seat at the champion's banquet for those who overcome the temptation to sin, but He offers a new name. A name

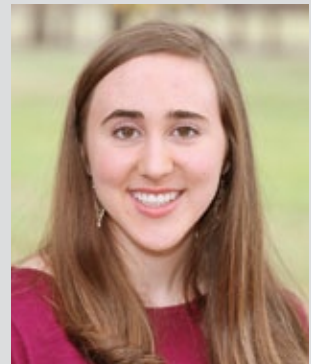
bestowed by the King Himself, unique to that person and known only by that person and the One who gave it to him.¹⁰ We are called to live and work for a cause that is far greater than ourselves. Our Master is Jesus Himself, whose free offer of eternal life can be extended to all. This calling is truly worth the price He paid. As a pharmacist, to whom have you given your allegiance: the Greek god Asclepius, or the One true God of healing, Jehovah Rapha? What outcome is more important to you, health or holiness?

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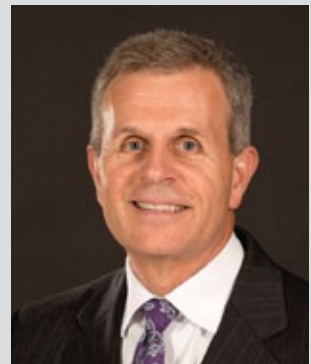
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