Christians love stories with happy, redemptive endings. Nothing wrong with that. After all, the well-examined Christian life proclaims a metanarrative chock full of redemption at every step, complete with the best and-they-lived-happily-ever-after ending ever conceived. Such good news informs our daily lives, bringing us no shortage of eternal hope in the midst of earthly suffering.

But does such a mindset, at least on occasion, cause us to dismiss or hurry through the pain on the front end because we know the end result is, eventually, going to be good? Let’s be honest. It’s a lot easier reading Job knowing that he recovers his losses and then some after his period of testing, isn’t it? And how many Christians, especially in our feel-good American culture, have a hard time fully embracing the pathos of Good Friday because of the soon-coming Easter celebration? (Check out the May issue of Worship Leader for more on our reluctance—but our need—to lament in worship.)

What do we do, though, when the story seems not to get tied up neatly in the end? When the pain doesn’t go away? When the hero of the story ends up looking, feeling, or behaving more like Jonah than Job? What then?

Hard Knocks

William Cowper’s is one such story. Born in Berkhamstead, England, just northwest of London, in 1731, Cowper (pronounced “Coo-per”) entered a family already wracked with suffering. He is the fourth child born to Rev. John Cowper and his wife Ann, but all three of his siblings die by the time of William’s birth. Two more children die in the next five years, and when a brother, John, is born, only the second of seven children who is destined to live into adulthood, Ann dies a few days later. John Piper, in an excellent lecture on the life of William Cowper available online (desiringgod.org), notes that the marriage of Cowper’s parents is “one sustained heartache.”

After Cowper’s inauspicious infancy, his childhood follows the trajectory of a Dickens novel. At six, he is sent to a boarding school a few miles away—although in that day it might as well have been across the globe. At the school, he is bullied mercilessly by his peers and disciplined harshly by his teachers (experiences he recounts much later in his famous poem “Tirocinium,” whose title refers to a gathering of raw novices or recruits).

Cowper receives a bit of a reprieve between the ages of 10 and 18, when he is sent to Westminster School, a time which fellow poet Robert Southey describes as “probably the happiest” in Cowper’s life. From that point forward, Piper concludes, his life “seems to be one long accumulation of pain.”

Deeper Disappointments

The first of Cowper’s serious battles with depression occurs in 1752, brought on, at least in part, it seems, from having spent years training for a career in law for which this eventual man of letters could muster up no enthusiasm. Soon thereafter, Cowper falls in love with and becomes engaged to his cousin, Theodora, but her father brings an end to the relationship, a loss Cowper takes hard. (Theodora materializes later as “Delia” in a series of poems he writes.)

At the age of 28, Cowper, though not motivated by his vocation, is touted for a significant promotion to a parliamentary position, mostly through the behind-the-scenes machinations of his father. The stress of the impending responsibility, coupled with the fact that his father’s enemies in parliament decide to subject Cowper to a public grilling as a prerequisite of the appointment, turns him suicidal. Although unsuccessful in three attempts to take his life, Cowper is deemed insane and sent to an asylum whose caretaker is Dr. Nathaniel Cotton, an evangelical Christian. There Cowper recovers and accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Surprise Ends

And that’s where the story should end. Cowper should remain sane, track Theodora down and marry her (or someone quite like her), father several brilliant children, establish himself as one of England’s chief poets and hymn writers, and
die a contented man, bouncing several brilliant grandchildren on his knee the very evening before he dies peacefully in his sleep. Isn’t that how Jane Austen would have tied up this conflicted man’s life?

It doesn’t happen quite like that, unfortunately. Cowper leaves the asylum but vacillates between mental equilibrium and severe depression the rest of his life. His 30-year friendship with John Newton (the former slave trader and author of “Amazing Grace”) serves as one of only a few bright spots the rest of the way. Cowper tries, unsuccessfully, to commit suicide several more times, and he dies, Piper tells us, “apparently in utter despair” in 1800.

The Fountain

One can begin to make some sense of Cowper’s life by studying the verses of one of his most famous hymns, “There Is a Fountain.” Written during a happy swing in Cowper’s mood while he retreated at Newton’s home, the hymn initially proclaims,

There is fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel’s veins
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains

Cowper here references Zephaniah 13:1, “On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David…to cleanse them from sin and impurity.” Though he often thought himself a reprobate and unworthy of salvation, Cowper was able to acknowledge—at least at that moment, in the company of a dear friend—that Christ’s blood cleanses completely.

The second verse shows Cowper’s profound understanding of both the sinfulness of all mankind and also the redemption available through Jesus:

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in that day
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away

Painfully aware of his own frailty—likening it to the utter sinfulness of the thief on the cross—Cowper, despite all he had been through, testifies in hope-filled terms to his forgiveness, and that of all who “take the plunge.”

Cowper’s final, poignant verse serves as a microcosm of his entire life:

When this poor lisping, stammering tongue
Lies silent in the grave
Then in a nobler, sweeter song
I’ll sing the power to save

Cowper’s lisping—metaphorical or literal (one author suggests that, on top of everything else, Cowper had a speech impediment)—kept his “song” from regularly being sweet in this life; indeed, his life’s song often resembled a dirge. But Cowper held tightly, at least at the time of this writing, to the belief that all Christians have an eternal destiny where “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:17).

Stark Reality

That “lisping,” Cowper’s lyric implies and his biography attests, was never fully healed in this life. John Fischer, in his wonderful devotional Be Thou My Vision, writes,

What a dark context to some of the greatest lyrics ever written on the love of God! … What a reminder of the stark reality of life and the fact that God doesn’t always fix everything for us the way we would like.

As we reflect upon William Cowper’s life 200 years later, we do well to remember the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul’s preternaturally peppy prose throughout so much of the New Testament perhaps dulls our senses to the harsh reality of his “thorn in the flesh,” and the fact that God chose not to remove it.

The title of one of Cowper’s other famous hymns reminds us that “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.” One of its verses exhorts, “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense / but trust him for his grace.” When, in the midst of tribulation, we are tempted to walk by sight and not by faith, may we take comfort hearing the voice of our Lord saying to us with confidence, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

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