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WAS CHRIST PUNISHED FOR OUR DISEASES?

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The question is often stated as follows: "Is bodily healing in the Atonement?" But thus stated it becomes somewhat ambiguous in meaning, and in any important question like this it is essential that we should know exactly what we are talking about. Hence, in order to pin down the exact idea and isolate it from other confusing issues, I have stated the question as indicated in the title of this paper: "Was Christ Punished for our Diseases?"

Many pastors have had to face this problem as it has been raised in their communities, both by false cults and sincere inquirers. The particular theory which has provoked these inquiries is that held by certain religious movements which are characterized by extreme forms of "Pentecostalism." It is also held, I am sorry to say, by individuals within Protestant churches here and there.

In brief, this particular healing theory may be stated as follows: When Christ died on the Cross, its adherents argue, He made atonement for our diseases as well as for our sins. Therefore, they conclude, no true Christian need be sick or diseased at any time. If a Christian suffers from physical disease (as all of us do sooner or later) these theorists explain the situation by the following alternatives: The sick Christian has either failed to "appropriate" fully the benefits of the atonement, or else he is guilty of some personal sin for which the sickness is sent as a divine judgment. In either case, they say, the whole responsibility rests upon the person. It is always the will of God to heal, according to their theory, if we truly repent of our sins and believe in the fullness of our Lord's work on the Cross. If we are sick, we are either lost or backslidden. No true Christian, they argue, can be sick if he is in complete fellowship with God.

The Biblical passages upon which this theory has been mainly built are found in the books of Isaiah and Matthew. The first reads as follows: "Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4). The second includes a direct quotation of the first: "When the even was come, they brought unto Him many that were possessed of devils; and He cast out the spirits with His Word, and healed all that were sick: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses" (Matt. 8:16-17).

WHAT DO THESE PASSAGES MEAN?

Two preliminary questions must be settled. First, do these "griefs," "sorrows," "infirmities," and "sicknesses" refer to ailments of the body or of the soul? While exegetically it might be possible to interpret the Isaiah passage in either one of these senses, if taken alone,

its quotation by Matthew leaves no possible doubt that in that particular context he applies it to physical diseases. It is impossible to deny this on the ground of any impartial exegesis. And the parallel passage in Mark 1:34 settles the matter: "He healed many that were sick of divers diseases."

The second question is this: When and how did our Lord Jesus Christ take our infirmities and bear our sicknesses, as affirmed by Matthew on the basis of Isa. 53:4? The constant assumption of those who preach the "Atonement Healing" theory described above is that Christ did this when He died at Calvary. But it is a curious fact that the death of Christ is not mentioned specifically in either of the passages upon which the theory has been mainly built. The fact that the first text occurs in the great 53rd chapter of Isaiah has doubtless led some superficial readers to assume that the fourth verse must refer to the death of Christ. And certainly the death of Christ looms large in that chapter. But let us not forget that it contains many other details of what He was and what He did. As to the fourth verse and its precise meaning, surely the safest guide to its exact interpretation will be found in Matthew's use of it in his Gospel. And what does Matthew say? Christ healed the sick, he declares (8:16), and in so doing He "fulfilled" this particular prophecy in Isaiah 53:4. It was by His ministry of healing while living, not when He died, that He "took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses." There is no mention by Matthew of our Lord's death or atonement in this connection. On the contrary, Matthew tells how He healed sickness, and then declares that by this ministry He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:4a. And since Matthew wrote by divine inspiration, this is God's interpretation, not man's.

There is no mystery about all this. The passage does not say that Christ died or suffered for the infirmities of men. He "took" them. The same verb is used in Matt. 5:40, "If any man take away thy coat." Everyone knows exactly what this means. It is a practical, not a judicial act. Even so our Lord took away the sicknesses of men in His day by healing them. Furthermore, in the case of the other expression, "bare our sicknesses," the Greek verb here is never used in the New Testament with reference to our Lord's atoning death. According to McNeile, with whom A. T. Robertson fully agrees, the verb bastazō "as Matthew employs it, has no bearing on the doctrine of the atonement" (Word Pictures in the N.T., p. 67). An excellent example of its meaning is found in Gal. 6:2, "Bear ye one another's burdens," where it very obviously refers to sympathetic helpfulness and has nothing to do with the idea of atonement. It was thus the Lord "bare" the sicknesses of man--by giving them relief.

THE ABSURDITY OF ATONEMENT FOR DISEASE

The verbs "took" and "bare" in the passage under discussion cannot refer to an act of substitutionary suffering and death such as we have in the Cross of our Lord. Those who wrongly teach that they do have such a reference probably have not realized clearly just where such a doctrine must finally lead. Logically it would lead to the absurd and monstrous notion that Christ suffered disease somehow in our stead, a notion from which every enlightened believer must shrink with abhorrence.

The cause of this error seems to arise out of a confusion of two separate things, namely, sin and disease. Sickness is not sin; it is rather the result of sin. We punish men for sinning,

but not for getting sick. Certainly a man may become diseased through breaking the law, but in dealing with such a man we at once separate the sin from the disease. We may punish him for his sin, but we send him to the hospital for his disease. The laws of nations are far from perfect, but they do not punish men for being sick. Once we see this clearly, it is easy to find our way out of the confusion about healing and atonement.

Christ died for our sins, not for our diseases. He was made sin for us; He was not made disease for us. Christ never forgave disease. He forgave sin, and healed diseases. Death is the divine penalty for sin, not for disease. Therefore, the death of Christ as our Substitute was penal, not pathological. Christ died in our stead. He did not (I speak reverently) have tuberculosis in our stead. To look clearly and steadily at this matter is sufficient to disperse all the clouds of misunderstanding. Those who go out into eternity lost will suffer punishment according to their sins, not according to the number of diseases they may have had.

THE TRUE RELATION OF CALVARY AND SICKNESS

In nearly all doctrinal errors there may be discovered a grain of truth, and the matter under discussion is no exception. The death of our Lord did have something to do with sickness and disease, for these things are the results of sin. The entrance of sin into the human race brought a whole train of disaster, a veritable Pandora's Box filled with unimaginable evils, including disease, weakness, poverty, insanity, and inefficiency. Now at Calvary God dealt with sin once and for all, and thereby laid the moral foundation upon the basis of which He would be able to banish at last from the universe every evil result caused by sin. But the actual banishment of these things will come according to the plan and time of God, not of men.

Everything in its own order. At the Coming of the Lord from heaven His saints will be delivered forever from all weakness, sickness, and death. When He establishes His Kingdom, poverty and all the ordinary social evils will be abolished. And at last death itself, the final enemy, shall be destroyed. Thus we see that the death of Christ provided for the destruction of all that is evil. Looking at the matter from this viewpoint, nothing lies outside the scope of the atonement. The very heavens above were somehow purified (Heb. 9:23), and the prince of this world was cast out (John 12:31), when our Lord died at Calvary. That Satan at this very hour still dwells in heavenly places does not invalidate the work of the Cross. It only means that the doom of Satan, made certain at Calvary, will be visited upon him in God's own good time. In like manner the banishment of all weakness and disease from the bodies of the saved will be carried out according to God's perfect plan and calendar. Even though we may sometimes in the midst of affliction ask, "How long, O Lord?," we are not to think that God is slack concerning His promises as some men count slackness. But He cannot be hurried by the theories of men.

BUT DOES GOD HEAL THE BODY TODAY?

Does what has been said above mean that there is no help here and now for the child of God caught in the grip of disease and affliction? Must he be satisfied with mere human skill, and for more than this wait until the coming of the Lord? Is the power of the Lord to heal available at all for the Christian during the present age of Grace? The answer is emphatically Yes--God

does heal the body today. But mark the important qualification--When it is His will to heal. The power of God is never limited by time or place, but only by His own holy and sovereign will. Nothing is clearer in Scripture than the fact that it is not always God's will to relieve the believer of his physical afflictions. There is a glorious and divine ministry oftentimes in suffering. God uses infirmity and suffering for our eternal good and His own glory. It is not only theologically wrong, but also spiritually disastrous, to teach Christians that they are either lost or backslidden if they suffer from bodily illness. The trial of our faith is precious. And sometimes it takes more faith to suffer than to be healed. The great Apostle prayed three times to be relieved of a certain "thorn in the flesh," and found that he was not praying in harmony with God's will (2 Cor. 12:1-10). The Lord did not grant the request, but gave something better. "My grace," He said very tenderly, "is sufficient for thee." And, after all, it is better to have the all-sufficient grace of God than to be relieved of a few aches and pains.

God does heal the body today, when it is His will. But we are not to forget that the body of the believer is not yet redeemed. Its final redemption certainly was provided for at the Cross. The price was paid in full. Nothing can ever be added to that. But for the present even the redeemed must say with Paul, "Even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23). What a glorious day that day of redemption will be, when at His coming He will fashion anew these bodies of our humiliation so that they shall be conformed to the body of His glory, according to the working whereby He is able to subdue all things unto Himself (Phil. 3:21, A.S.V.): no more sickness, no more weakness, no more sorrow, no more pain, no more death. The very hope of that glorious day will take away the bitterness of all unrelieved affliction here and now.

"Come, Lord Jesus."