

Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

Physical Healing and the Atonement

written by Bob DeWaay

Matthew 8:16b,17

“. . .and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill in order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, `He Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases.’”

1Peter 2:24

“And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.”

A teaching that has been popular since the nineteenth century says that Jesus died for our sicknesses as well as our sins. **Matthew 8:16,17 & 1Peter 2:24** are the passages cited as proof. The doctrine is called “physical healing in the atonement.” The implications of this are that Christians should have just as much confidence that God will heal their bodies as they have that God will forgive their sins. Also, Christians should not expect it to be God's will for them to be sick any more than it would be His will for them to continue in sin. Some take the First Peter passage to mean that we are already healed and we must merely confess the fact and deny the “lying symptoms” that appear to be in our bodies. Matthew quoted Isaiah 53:4a and Peter Isaiah 53:5b, both of which are in the context of Isaiah's prophecy about Messiah's atoning work.

1Peter 2:24 and Healing

A.B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, chooses 1Peter 2:24 to show healing through the atonement for us now.¹ After quoting 1Peter 2:24 he states:

In His own body He has borne all our bodily liabilities for sin, and our bodies are set free. In the one cruel “stripe” of His - for the word is singular - was summed up all the aches

and pains of a suffering world. There is no longer need that we should suffer what Christ has sufficiently borne. Thus our healing becomes a great redemption right that we simply claim as our purchased inheritance through the blood of Christ's cross.²

The fact that A. B. Simpson called healing a “right” to be “claimed,” could possibly lead to a rather insolent attitude toward our Lord. It is better to ask God for “grace to help in our time of need” (**Hebrew 4:16b**) than to claim our rights. The “claim your rights” approach has been accentuated by some modern healing preachers.

Another writer from early in the twentieth century also uses **1Peter 2:24** to show healing in the atonement. Dr. T. J. McCrossan wrote Bodily Healing and the Atonement in 1930, which was republished by Kenneth Hagin in 1982. He states, “We can, therefore, be fully assured that when Peter declares, `By . . . [His] stripes [bruise] ye were healed,’ he is referring to our bodily healing, and not to any spiritual healing.”³ McCrossan claims that “*iaomai*” (The Greek word for heal used in 1Peter 2:24) always speaks of physical healing. Contrary to this assertion, The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament states about this Greek word translated “healed” in 1Peter 2:24, “In the literature of the apostolic age the figurative use of the terms is restricted to OT quotations apart from the single instance at Hb. 12:13. . . In 1 Pt. 2:24, Is 53:5 is referred to the atoning work of Christ. In such passages `iasthai’ denotes the restoration of divine fellowship through the forgiveness of sins, and all the saving benefits which accompany it.”⁴

Modern writers and teachers also use **1Peter 2:24** to teach bodily healing in the atonement. Dr. Paul Yonggi Cho writes referencing **Isaiah 53:5** and **1Peter 2:24**, “Quoting this scripture, Peter writes eloquently that our Lord redeemed us from our sins and sicknesses at the same time: `who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead

to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.’”⁵ He also references this passage to teach that, “. . . we proclaim the truth that as many as are saved should also experience healing.”⁶ Dr. Cho deals with Isaiah 53:4 and its use in this connection: “Accordingly, if we believe that Christ redeemed us from our sins, we should believe that He redeemed us from our sicknesses also. If we cannot believe in *both* kinds of redemption, we must not believe in *any* kind of redemption, for Jesus carried away both our sins and our sicknesses.”⁷

I am concerned that this position could have a detrimental effect on some who accept it. It backs us into a corner, forcing us to adopt this stringent version of physical healing or question our redemption. Can the Christian who is suffering with physical illness still rest assured that he has been redeemed by the blood of Christ?

“Confessing” One's Healing

Popular faith teacher Kenneth Hagin states:

The best method by which you can be healed is to know for yourself from our text Scriptures (Isaiah 53:4,5, Matthew 8:17, and First Peter 2:24) that healing is in God's redemptive plan; it belongs to you; and by His stripes we are healed. *We refuse to allow disease of sickness in our bodies, because we ARE healed.* We know that the pain, sickness, or disease that seems to be in our bodies was laid on Jesus. He bore it. We do not need to bear it. All we need to do is agree with God and His Word and accept the fact that “*himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses*” and “*with his stripes we are healed.*” . . . All believers should thoroughly understand that their healing was consummated in Christ. When they come to know that in their spirits - just as they know it in their heads - that will be the end of sickness and disease in their bodies.⁸

This approach to healing is forceful and seemingly very positive if true. Christians need not be sick because **1Peter 2:24** says that we are already healed. If we are sick it is because of a lack of the right kind of knowledge. However, it is not clear what differentiates “head” knowl-

edge and “spirit” knowledge. These categories could possibly be construed in terms of Greek mysticism or gnosticism in which the material realm is illusory or less real than the spiritual realm. This is not the view of the Jewish writers of Scripture.

Another example of the “Word of Faith” approach is shown in the following quotation of popular faith preacher Frederick Price:

Jesus said if I'd believe it in my heart and say it with my mouth, I could have it. And the reason I can have it is, when He died on Calvary, He healed me then. “. . . *Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses*” (Matthew 8:17). “. . . *by whose stripes ye WERE healed*” (1Peter 2:24). The Bible says that. It also says the Word is nigh me, even in my mouth. So I just start saying, “Praise God, I'm healed.” When the devil comes and tries to put a symptom on me, I say, “You can't put that on me, I'm healed. Didn't you know that? Read the Bible, devil. I'm healed.”⁹

Millions of books, tracts, and audio tapes have been published in the last twenty years promoting this approach to physical healing. Many Christians have placed great hope and expectation in the teaching that they are healed and must confess their healing no matter what the condition of their body. Some testify that this approach works and others that they have been disappointed by it.

The problem is that there is a self-fulfilling aspect to claiming healing as a redemption right and then steadfastly confessing it without regard to apparent symptoms. If one is not healed and eventually admits it or the condition becomes too severe to hide, it is easy to say that they did not have the proper faith and use the fact that they are now “confessing” their sickness as proof of inadequate faith. In my own experience I have seen people frustrated and afraid to admit that they need help with a sickness for fear of disappointing their Christian friends who are confessing healing. “If I am supposed to be healed,” they reason, “then something must be wrong with my faith or God must be displeased with me because I am obviously sick.” Peter said that we “are healed.” What is the problem?

1Peter 2:24 in Context

The problem is that **1Peter 2:24 is not about physical healing**. Not only is the first part of the verse about the forgiveness of sins, the next verse also explains Peter's meaning: “For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls” (**1Peter 2:25**). There is no mention of bodily sickness anywhere in 1Peter 2. Simon Kistemaker states, “The expression healed [in 1 Peter 2:24] means ‘to be forgiven.’”¹⁰ The phrase “you have returned to the Shepherd” shows what Peter means by “healed” in verse 24.

It is hard to see how an honest reading of **1Peter 2:24** and the context (following Christ's example through bearing up while suffering in an unjust situation **verses 19-23**) could lead one to the conclusion that Christians should not be sick because they have already been healed. Peter said, “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps” (**1Peter 2:21**). This is the very opposite of the modern notion that Christ suffered so we should not have to. The passage is addressed to Christian slaves (**1Peter 2:18**) who may have been mistreated by their owners. A. T. Robertson comments about the word “wounds” in verse 24, “Writing to slaves who may have received such stripes, Peter's word is effective.”¹¹ There is much consolation in the fact that Christ went through a cruel beating (like those mistreated slaves might endure) for the redemptive purpose of bringing them to God. God does heal the sick, but **1Peter 2:24** is not about physical healing.

Matthew 8:16,17 and Healing

A better case can be made for **Matthew 8:16,17** since it is clearly a reference to supernatural, physical healing. Jesus healed sick people during his earthly ministry and Matthew quoted **Isaiah 53:4** to show that He fulfilled Old Testament prophecy in doing so. The issue to be resolved is whether this implies that the death, burial and resurrection of Christ pays for the sicknesses of Christians.

A.B. Simpson bases healing in the atonement on his exegesis of Isaiah 53:4,5. He reasons, “Christ literally substituted His body for our body. That is the meaning of the words, ‘surely he hath borne our sicknesses.’ He took them upon Himself and relieved us of the load by His

atonement.”¹² He then refers to the commonly repeated notion that Christ died of a “rupture of the heart,” and concludes: “He died from the disease which He bore for us. So there is a sense in which Christ was really sick, but it was in our place, for it is added in the next verse, ‘And with his stripes we are healed’ (Isa. 53:5).”¹³ The next passage cited is **Matthew 8:16,17** from which he argues that Matthew confirms that Isaiah meant physical healing.¹⁴

Dr. T. J. McCrossan presents a most extensive analysis of Matthew's use of **Isaiah 53:4** to show that Christ died for our sicknesses as well as our sins.¹⁵ The main problem to be overcome is the fact that the phrase “in order that it may be fulfilled” is found six other times (Matthew 1:22; 2:15; 2:23; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4) in Matthew to show that prophecy was fulfilled during the life of Christ on earth, before His ascension into heaven. Though **Matthew 12:27** does in a sense concern future matters, the context concerns why Jesus did not want those he healed to make Him known (**Matthew 12:16**) - so that these future things would happen. The Jews elsewhere sought to make Him king in a nationalistic sense (**John 6:15**) and if that happened the Gentiles would not hope in Him as prophesied by Isaiah (**Matthew 12:21**).

In spite of Dr. McCrossan's arguments to the contrary,¹⁶ **Matthew 12:17** is about the fulfillment of prophecy during Christ's earthly ministry as is every other use of “*plersthe*” (that it might be fulfilled) in Matthew. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that **Matthew 8:17** is about the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, showing that Jesus is the Messiah.

That all of the Messianic passages and works of Christ that demonstrate His Messianic mission are applicable to Christians through out the church age is clear. The very fact that Jesus is the Christ makes many claims upon modern readers, not the least of which is His Lordship and the necessity of our submission to Him. However, **Matthew 8:17** does not demonstrate that Christians should expect to never be sick or that those who are have not lived up to the purpose of the atonement.

Atonement is for Sins

Merrill F. Unger emphasizes the sovereign act of God in physical healing:

Likewise, healing in the case of a Christian is a direct and sovereign act of God's gracious power, flowing from the cross of Christ, as all God's blessings to fallen man, but independent of it and subject to the dispensation of an all-wise Heavenly Father. This is the reason why Matthew declares Isaiah's prophecy that Christ would bear 'our sicknesses' and carry our 'sorrows' (Isa. 53:4) was fulfilled in Christ's ministry of physical healing (Matt. 8:17), not in His atoning death on the cross. Christ's miracles of healing served to certify Him as the Redeemer and were signs of the spiritual healing He came to bring. At the same time they were pledges also of the ultimate full deliverance of the redeemed, not only from sin, but from every evil consequence of it in the body as well as the soul. In this sense only did Christ atone for our physical sicknesses.¹⁷

This point is important. There are many consequences of sin and Christ's atoning death ultimately delivers believers from all of them, though not totally until after the resurrection. We have the "earnest" of the spirit now that includes His gifts (including "healings" **1 Corinthians 12:9**) working in the church.

We cannot say that in a "perfect" church there would be no sick Christians because they would all be walking in the full provision of physical health provided in the atonement. In such a case, there would be no need to call the elders to pray for the sick (**James 5:14-16**) or for the operation of the gift of healing. One could argue that these provisions are for the carnal Christians who do not "know in their spirits" that they are already healed; but to do so is stating what the Bible does not say. "Physically sick Christians" and "carnal Christians" are not synonymous.

For Example, Epaphroditus had risked his life (**Philippians 2:30**) by going on a dangerous journey while sick to bring a gift from Philippi to Rome for Paul. Paul said, "God had mercy on him," (**Philippians 2:27**) and that the Philippians should "hold men like him in high regard" (**Philippians 2:29**). If Christians who become sick are falling short of God's provision in the atonement because of spiritual ignorance, sin, or unbelief, then why would Paul urge that such a one be held in high regard?

In an excellent, comprehensive, and up to date article on healing, Douglas Moo

discusses (along with many other issues about healing) **Matthew 8:17** and its relationship to the healing in the atonement doctrine. He states, "The problem is that Matthew says nothing in this context about Jesus' death. Matthew may not, then, have Jesus' death in mind at all as he cites Isa. 53:4: the Hebrew text that he appears to use, may simply have presented itself to him as a useful OT 'proof-text' for the healing ministry of Jesus."¹⁸ He doubts this possible interpretation because Matthew does link **Isaiah 53** with the atonement elsewhere in his gospel and this would have him taking **Isaiah 53:4** out of context. He rather reasons,

Matt. 8:17 implies that Jesus' death is the basis for his healing of physical disease. But we should probably refrain from speaking of healing being "in" the atonement. For, as Warfield points out, "atonement" has to do with the cancellation of guilt, and should be directly applied only to sins. We would prefer, then, to say that physical healing is one *effect* of the atoning death of Christ.¹⁹

This point is well taken. If sickness needs atonement and one of the aspects of atonement is the appeasement or satisfaction of the wrath of God against sinners (**Romans 3:5,23-26; 5:9,10**), then those who are sick would have reason to feel particularly subject to God's wrath **because** of being sick. It seems incongruous for the physically suffering to go before God needing atonement for their circumstances. The sick are not worse sinners than the healthy (**John 9:2f & Luke 13:1-3**).

Physical Healing

Doug Moo also discusses the relationship between sin, sickness and the future: This being the case, and the effects of Christ's death being applied to people through a process of time, it is specious to claim that the believer must have deliverance from sickness in the same way and to the same extent that he or she has deliverance from sin. The atoning death of Christ provides for the healing of all our diseases - but nothing in Matthew or in the NT implies that this healing will take place in this life.²⁰ Clearly the fullness of healing will take

place at the resurrection and this is a direct benefit of the atonement. Perfect health and healing for eighty plus years resulting in an eventual, peaceful step into eternity when the Lord calls us home is likely the hope and desire of every Christian. This was not what happened for every saint in the New Testament nor is it for many today in spite of modern medicine.

It is not surprising that the teaching that every Christian ought to have this experience because of the atonement meets with resistance by some and frustration by others. Many do not believe the doctrine because *prima facie* it is not the way things are. Others believe it because the arguments of those who teach it are convincing, but they are frustrated because they cannot live up to it. This situation has caused some recent rethinking and modification of the teaching of divine healing.

Peter Masters (who sees danger in many modern healing teachings) concedes that, based on **Matthew 8:17**, the "Saviour bore away for us on Calvary both the punishment for sin and the *consequences* of sin, which include all the results of the curse - disease, suffering, misery and death."²¹ He agrees that, ". . . there is no doubt that bodily restoration is purchased in the atonement. But it does not follow that this bodily restoration is wholly available *now*."²² He illustrates this with deliverance from physical death that is provided in the atonement, but which we have not yet received. He concludes, "If the Lord, in answer to prayer, grants that we recover from an illness, we remember that He purchased the right to forgive and heal us by bearing away the *consequences* of sin on Calvary. But the principal fruit of this aspect of our Lord's atonement lies in the future, when all sickness and bodily decay, including death, will be swept away for ever. . . The healings which we may experience now are merely a token of that coming deliverance."²³

That healings are provisional and not absolute is clear from the fact of the aging process that leads to death. The atoning work of Christ primarily concerns our sins because it is sin that separates us from the Holy God. It was sin that brought about the fallen condition that made disease possible. Sicknesses are only one of the consequences of sin. The ultimate consequence is death, for which Jesus died to deliver us. This deliverance

has its ultimacy in the resurrection that puts an end to sickness and death.

Implications and Applications

It is clear that Matthew cited **Isaiah 53:4** to show that Jesus the Messiah fulfilled this prophecy when He healed sick people during His earthly ministry. This has further implications because of the nature of Isaiah 53 and its reference to Messiah's atoning work. Yet it does not, as far as the Matthew passage itself goes, directly address the modern questions that many are trying to answer. For example, Matthew was not answering the question, "should every believer whose sins have been cleansed by the blood of Christ expect not to become sick?" Neither does he answer the question, "Should all believers who have become sick consider themselves having fallen short of the will of God for their lives through neglect, sin, or unbelief?" There is a relationship between these questions and **Matthew 8:16,17** but it is an indirect one.

Because it is clear that there is promised total deliverance from disease and death through the resurrection and because our resurrection is assured because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (a part of the atoning work of the Cross) it is clear that our healing is in the atonement. It is not clear to what extent that, because of the atonement, we can expect to experience physical healings of the illnesses that afflict, in differing degrees, all human beings. Can God promise healing to His people even in this life, without the converse being true - that those Christians who are not healed from some physical maladies are falling short of the will and plan of God for their lives?

Because the atonement of Christ is applied to sin and not primarily or directly to the various effects of sin, and because the New Testament does not indicate that the absence of sickness and weakness is to be the norm for Christians, and because of the obvious fact that all humans, including faithful Christians, have some degree of "sickness" or departure from perfect health in their bodies, the physical healing in the atonement theory as popularly understood is not true. Healing is in the atonement in the sense that all the benefits of Christ's substitutionary death apply to all believers and will find their complete fulfillment at the return of Christ and the resur-

rection. It is because of the atonement that Christians have been healed, are being healed and will be healed. This does not mean that we should expect never to suffer with an illness in this life or that God has guaranteed to remove any illness that might come into one's life.

If a Christian becomes sick, he or she should faithfully and obediently ask God for healing according to the instructions of **James 5:14-16**. God's promise to "raise up" the sick person does not have to be absolute to be valid. We should teach the saints about this matter and have the elders of the church available to anoint the sick with oil and pray for them, with confession of sins as is appropriate. Calling upon the Lord in faith and in obedience to Scripture is clearly the right thing to do. The presence or absence of an instantaneous miracle of healing does not determine the validity of the prayer and anointing.

Also, the Scripture does not state that **James 5:14-16** is the only thing the sick Christian can do. For one thing, he or she can seek medical attention. Ongoing prayer for the suffering in any congregation is in order. It is unwise to present the matter in such a way that one's participation in the benefits of Christ's atonement is placed in doubt if physical ailment persists.

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