

FOR WHAT DID CHRIST ATONE IN ISA 53:4-5?

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Isaiah 53:4-5 raises the question, "For what did Christ atone?" or more specifically, "Is physical healing in the atonement?" Outside Isaiah 53, Scriptures touching on Christ's atonement in Leviticus and Hebrews deal only with sin, not sickness. The context and language of Isa 53:3-12 address sin alone. A broad range of Scriptures teach that Christ died to deal with humankind's sin dilemma. Matthew 8:16-17 uses an illustration of physical healing to demonstrate a spiritual truth about the Christian's resurrection hope of being sinless and thus in perfect health. First Pet 2:24, studied in both broad context (2:18-25) and narrow (2:24-25), reasons that Christ atoned for sin, not sickness. Therefore, the conclusion is that physical healing is not in the atonement, but rather comes through the atonement after resurrection, because only then does the atonement eliminate the moral cause of physical infirmities, which is sin in one's personal experience.

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As I browsed through some commentaries at my favorite Christian bookstore in Columbus, Ohio, a dear lady whom I had recently visited in the hospital and prayed for entered and walked toward me. Greeting her, I remarked how well she looked. She responded, "By His stripes I have been healed. Praise God there is healing in Christ's atonement."

The bookstore was no place that day for a theology lesson. I did not want to dampen her joy, nor did I want to rob her confidence that God had somehow been involved in her physical restoration (Deut 32:39). However, her understanding of Isa 53:5 and 1 Pet 2:24 did not

relate biblically to what she had experienced.

I wondered where she had learned those proof texts. Perhaps she had read or listened to a faith healer's explanation of Isaiah 53.¹ A friend or neighbor may have told her. Possibly she heard this on Christian TV or radio. For certain, many explanations of Isa 53:4-5 at the popular level raise more questions than they answer and frequently prove to be less than precise biblical treatments of the subject at hand.

By a careful look at Isaiah 53 and related passages, the following discussion purposes to entertain biblically such questions as, "Is there healing in the atonement?" "If there is, what kind, how much, and when do I get it?" Perhaps it would be more accurate to inquire, "Was Christ punished for our diseases?"² Or "In what way is physical healing related to the atonement?" or even "For what did Christ atone?"³ Did Christ bear our diseases in His body the same way He bore our sins? Can we have freedom from sickness in this life as we have forgiveness of sins?

The search for biblical answers begins by looking not at healing, but rather at the atonement.

The Atonement⁴

¹For brief historical summaries of the faith healing movement in the United States and Canada see Richard Mayhue, *The Healing Promise* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1994) 27-39, and John Wilkinson, "Physical Healing and the Atonement," *EQ* 63/2 (April 1991):149-55. For more in-depth treatments consult J. Sidlow Baxter, *Divine Healing of the Body* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 29-105; Frank C. Darling, *Biblical Healing* (Boulder, CO: Vista, 1989); *Christian Healing in the Middle Ages and Beyond* (Boulder, CO: Vista, 1990); *The Restoration of Christian Healing* (Boulder, CO: Vista, 1992); David E. Harrell, Jr., *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1975); Michael G. Moriarity, *The New Charismatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 20-86; Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (reprint, Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1972) 33-69.

²Alva J. McClain, *Was Christ Punished for Our Diseases?* (Winona Lake: BMH, n.d.).

³W. Kelly Bokovay, "The Relationship of Physical Healing to the Atonement," *Didaskalia* 3/2 (April 1991):26, 35.

⁴The other significant question raised by Isa 53:4-5, "For whom did Christ atone?" is treated in such standard works as R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985) 513-35; R. B. Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*

Mention of the atonement sacrifice (כִּפּוּר [kippur, "pacify, atone"]) first appears in Scripture as a part of the Mosaic sacrificial system⁵ (cf. Exod 29:33, 36-37; 30:10, 15-16). On this one day of the year, Israel's high priest entered the Holy of Holies, approached the Ark of the covenant, and sprinkled blood to atone for the sins of Israel.

Aaron, the brother of Moses, was the very first high priest to enter the Holy Place with a bull for an offering (Lev 16:3). Was it for a sin or a sick offering? Unquestionably, it was a sin offering (Lev 16:11). Aaron offered a bull for a sin offering—first for himself and his household (16:5-6).

And he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel, and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins. . . (16:16, cf. v. 34).

Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel, and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins . . . (16:21).

Moses instituted the Day of Atonement by the authority of God about 1450-1400 B.C. Hundreds of years later (about 700-680 B.C.), Isaiah wrote prophetically concerning a coming servant who would be "the ultimate atonement." The Atonement ritual that Moses established and the atonement prophecy that Isaiah penned, Jesus Christ would later fulfill in reality when He died for sins—not sicknesses.

The book of Hebrews (the "Leviticus" of the NT) demonstrates the unity of Scripture. When the final atonement that propitiated God's wrath occurred, Christ served as both the high priest and the sacrifice.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy

(Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976) 1:59-85; and George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Apostles* (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988).

⁵Read John V. Dahms, "Dying With Christ," *JETS* 36/1 (March 1993):15-23, which carefully relates the OT atonement to Christ's substitutionary death.

place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-12).

Jesus Christ as God incarnate became the Lamb slain for the sins of the world (John 1:29, 36; 1 John 2:2).

Hebrews 10 addresses the atonement's fulfillment in Jesus Christ. For example, "Then He said, 'Behold, I have come to do Thy will.' He takes away the first in order to establish the second. By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb 10:9-10).

In the old economy, year after year the high priest had to make atonement first for himself and his family and then for the nation. But with the new covenant, Christ had to sacrifice only once for everyone else, but not for Himself. Isaiah 53 anticipated Christ's one time sacrifice: "But He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God. . . . For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb 10:12, 14).

Both Leviticus and Hebrews demonstrate that in God's mind the atonement dealt immediately with sin, not sickness. It had everything to do with humankind's sin problem and the redemption needed to remove sin and its penalty, so that true believers might stand eternally justified before a holy God. Christ's atonement paid the due penalty for sin when God poured out His wrath upon Jesus Christ while upon the cross.

Textual Comments on Isaiah 53

Isaiah 53 serves indispensably as the heart of anyone's healing theology.⁶ One's biblical expectations for eventually restored health rest on this biblical bedrock. The "Magna Charta" of God's healing promise focuses on Christ's sacrificial death at Calvary. Clearly the

⁶I have been greatly surprised by the deficiency of attention given to Isaiah 53 by some of the most recent, highly visible volumes advocating a contemporary healing ministry. For instance, Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 169, devotes only one paragraph in a 299 page book on healing. John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) take less than four pages (152-56) out of 269 pages, but spend most of that space discussing what men have said rather than what the Scriptures teach. Benny Hinn, *Lord, I Need a Miracle* (Nashville: Nelson, 1993) provides less than two pages (55-56). Even Jeffrey Niehaus in *The Kingdom and the Power* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993) devotes less than 3 pages (48-50). For an excellent exegetical discussion of Isaiah 53 see Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 3:340-54.

emphasis of Isaiah 53 centers on spiritual salvation.⁷ Since sin is the moral cause of physical infirmities, it is not surprising (1) that sin and sickness are related and (2) that dealing with sin (the cause) eventually addresses sickness (the effect).

Isaiah 53 raises the question then, "What, if anything, does the prophet promise about physical restoration?"⁸ Or put another way, "Is Isa 53:4-5 limited to dealing only with sin and salvation?"

Surely our griefs He⁹ Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed through for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him (Isa 53:4-6).

The Hebrew words¹⁰ translated "griefs" (יַיִן)

⁷The New Testament consistently presents Christ as the Christian's substitutionary sin bearer in His atonement. See Matt 20:28; John 1:29; Rom 4:25; 5:6-8; 8:3; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 1:4; 3:13; 4:4-5; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 3:18; 1 John 2:2; 4:10.

⁸This is a legitimate question in light of other passages in Isaiah which point to a time of physical healing, e.g. 29:18; 33:24; 35:5-6; 65:20.

⁹This writer has assumed the Messianic identification of Jehovah's servant in Isaiah 52-53. See detailed discussions of this issue in David Baron, *The Servant of Jehovah* (reprint, Minneapolis: James Family, 1978) 3-47, and Kenneth D. Litwak, "The Use of Quotations from Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in the New Testament," *JETS* 26/4 (December 1983):385-94. Litwak notes, "Though quotations from Isaiah 53 are not numerous in the New Testament, allusions to the passage are deeply imbedded in the work of all the principal New Testament writers as well as the early fathers, particularly Clement and Barnabas. From this fact it is certain that the interpretation of Isaiah 53 as referring to Jesus belongs to the earliest thought of the primitive church" (387). For a classic Jewish example of rejecting Messianic implications see Gerald Sigal, *The Jew and the Christian Missionary: A Jewish Response to Missionary Christianity* (New York: KTAV, 1981).

¹⁰The language of Isaiah 53 is decidedly that of the atonement in Leviticus 16, which points strongly to a primary, if not exclusive, focus on the atonement's relationship to sin, not sickness. Read Douglas Judisch, "Propitiation in the Language and Typology of the Old Testament," *CTQ* 48/4 (October 1984):221-43; "Propitiation in Old Testament Prophecy" *CTQ* 49/1 (January 1985):1-17; W. Kay, "Isaiah," in *The Bible Commentary*, ed. by F.C. Cook (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 5:266; F. Duane Lindsey, "The Career of the Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12" *BSac* 139/556 (October-December 1982):312-29 and 140/557 (January-March 1983):21-39.