



## *Healing and the Atonement*

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This article examines the key passages of Scripture that make a specific connection between God's healing provision and the redemptive work of Christ. Is there healing in the Atonement? If so, what does the expression mean?

General matters related to divine healing are not discussed, since there should be no doubt about the Lord's ability to heal or His provision for healing today. "I, the Lord, am your healer" (Exodus 15:26)<sup>1</sup> is amply demonstrated throughout the Old and the New Testaments. He has made provision even today through the charisma of "gifts of healing" (1 Corinthians 12:9) and ministry in the local assembly (James 5:13–16).

### The Key Old Testament Passage

Numerous incidents of the Lord's healing His people could be cited, as well as specific statements that He "heals all your diseases" (Psalm 103:3). The focal point, however, must be Isaiah 53:4: "Surely our griefs [holi] He Himself bore [nasa], and our sorrows [make obh] He carried [sabhal]." Each of the Hebrew words is significant.

Unfortunately, the words "griefs" and "sorrows" do not adequately translate the Hebrew. Holi clearly means sickness or disease, as is evident from a number of passages in Deuteronomy 28 (such as verses 59 and 61). Similarly, make obh is used for physical pain. "Man is also chastened with pain on his bed" (Job 33:19). These same nouns are used in describing the Messiah as "a man of sorrows [make obh], and acquainted with grief [holi]" (Isaiah 53:3). The marginal notes of the NASB render these words as pain and sickness both here and in the following verse.

The Messiah is described in this way because in His death He took upon himself our sicknesses and pains. The verbs used in Isaiah 53:4 (nasa and sabhal) speak clearly to this point. Nasa means to lift, carry, bear, take away. Later in the chapter we read that "He Himself bore [nasa] the sin of many" (verse 12). This verb, in contexts like Isaiah 53, definitely conveys the idea of the Messiah dying for the sins and sicknesses of His people, and not only for them but in their place. The imagery of the scapegoat captures this concept of substitution when we read that "the goat shall bear [nasa] on itself all their iniquities" (Leviticus 16:22).

The verb sabhal speaks of bearing a heavy load. It occurs in Isaiah 53 in the context of the Messiah bearing our pains (verse 4) as well as our iniquities (verse 11). Undoubtedly, in the mind of Isaiah the death of the Messiah was for both the sins and the sicknesses of His people.

### Matthew 8:16,17 and Isaiah 53:4

Isaiah 53:4 is quoted only once in the New Testament. After recounting numerous healings and demon expulsions performed by Jesus, Matthew explained, "In order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 'He Himself took [lambano] our infirmities [astheneia], and carried away [bastazo] our diseases [nosos]' " (8:17).

The basic meaning of astheneia is that of weakness, but it is used often in the New Testament for sickness or disease (see Acts 28:9; Luke 5:15).

In its verb form it is used frequently for suffering bodily weakness; that is, being sick (see Matthew 25:39; John 11:1–3,6; James 5:14).

Nosos, a synonym, means disease or illness. (Curiously, the Septuagint at this point in Isaiah 53:4 translates the Hebrew word into hamartias [sins], for which there is no justification.) It is found with this meaning in passages like Acts 19:12; Matthew 4:23, 9:35; Luke 7:21; and many others.

As for the verbs, lambano, among its many meanings and wide usage, in this passage carries the idea of taking away or removing. One suggested meaning is “to take in order to carry away.” Bastazo means to remove, to carry away, or to bear; it correctly conveys the idea of the Isaiah passage.

#### Appropriateness of Matthew’s Quotation

Isaiah 53 focuses on the atoning death of Christ. How then could Matthew say that Isaiah 53:4 was fulfilled at a time prior to the Crucifixion? Several points need to be made.

The New Testament is normative for any interpretation of an Old Testament passage. Even though Jesus had not yet died, we have in Matthew 8 an anticipation of His death and its benefits. God is not limited by the trammels of time; it is we who live a time-space existence.

Matthew’s quotation of the Isaiah passage is proleptic (anticipatory) in nature. In a way somewhat incomprehensible, the benefits of the Cross extend back to all men of faith. The salvation of the Old Testament saints, even though they could not have been aware of it, took place on the basis of the yet-to-come sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

God, who may be said to exist in the eternal present, transcends time. Indeed, in His eyes Christ is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). (The phrase is taken by some to apply to the time of entering names in the Book of Life [Revelation 17:8], but the Greek word order more naturally suggests that it modifies the participle “slain” [see also 1 Peter 1:18–20]. In either event, the slain Lamb cannot be separated from the slain Lamb’s Book of Life.) Consequently, the benefits of the Cross span the entire history of mankind.

#### Some Conclusions

It is inescapable that there is an important connection between healing and the Atonement. Yet biblical passages that speak specifically and clearly to this issue are quite rare. Even the familiar and oft-quoted “by His scourging we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5; see 1 Peter 2:24) must be understood inclusively, embracing both spiritual salvation and physical healing. Yet we must recognize that the thrust of the great Messianic passage of Isaiah 52:13 through 53:12 is upon Christ’s dying for our sins. We ought, therefore, to be cautious about trying to formulate a detailed theology of “healing in the Atonement.” Yet we need to be convinced that divine healing is indeed mediated to us through the Cross.

An important aspect of biblical salvation is its holistic nature. Christ died to reverse the curse resulting from the sin of our first parents; He redeemed us from the curse of the Law (Galatians 3:13). The curse was death — both physical and spiritual. He died for the whole man, not only for man’s soul. His redemptive work includes salvation for all aspects of man’s being, however one conceives the interrelationship of body, soul, and spirit.

Physical healing occurs as a result of the atoning work of Christ, but at best it is only a temporary deliverance since all must die. The greater physical deliverance is the redemption of the body, which will undergo not only resurrection but also transformation, never again to be subject to sickness and disease (Romans 8:23; Philippians 3:20,21). Ultimately, the consequences of physical and spiritual death have been overcome by the death of the One who took upon himself both our sins and our sicknesses.

#### Endnote

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