

Acquainted With Grief

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The early sentences of John's gospel tell us that the Word came to His own, but His own did not receive Him. There were things about the Son of God that caused His own people to reject Him. In large part, they rejected the Christ because He did not fit their expectations, and it never dawned on them that they could be mistaken. A predominant expectation was that the Messiah would be a conquering hero who would overthrow the Romans, but there were other entrenched ideas about what the Messiah should be like.

The Gospels show that the people had expectations about His message. They had expectations about where the Messiah could and could not come from. They had expectations about what He should do and not do, and when. They had expectations about the rituals and traditions He should keep, with whom He should associate, and about how He should do His work. They had expectations about signs and miracles and wonders, and they even had expectations about which family He should be from. Essentially they expected their savior to validate everything that they already believed. They had built up a concept of the Messiah in their minds and Jesus of Nazareth did not measure up to it, so He was rebuffed by all except those to whom God gave spiritual understanding.

Now there is an aspect of Christ's life that may have contributed to His rejection. It is not something that is directly spelled out, but rather something that Scripture allows for and seems to indicate. And that is that His bearing of our sicknesses and infirmities may have taken place *throughout* His life rather than just in His final hours. He was, of course, sinless, but He may have been acquainted with ill health for our benefit. Again, this is not definitive, but today we will look at this possibility, which you may find encouraging. We will start with the summary of Christ's physical life as described in Hebrews. If you would please turn with me to Hebrews chapter 2 and we will begin in verse 10. It says,

Hebrews 2:10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

Notice that final word. Christ was made perfect through sufferings, plural, and this indicates that His experience with hardship was far from limited to His crucifixion, but rather that sufferings were a foundational part of how He was made complete for His position as High Priest. He had to be able to personally identify with what His people would experience. Let us see this again in verse 14.

Hebrews 2:14 Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.

The Son of God was born of a woman and thus consisted of the same flesh and blood as His creation. He shared the same physical state of being as those whom He would be redeeming, mediating for, and ultimately bringing to glory. God experienced life in human flesh. He was subject to hunger, to fatigue, to pain, and to all of the bodily processes that we are.

We will keep going in verse 17.

Hebrews 2:17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

He experienced life like His brethren in all things so that He could be our Mediator, our Comforter, our Advocate. He was made like His brethren in all things in order to make propitiation, meaning to make atonement for or to have mercy on. The wages of sin is death, but sin has other consequences as well, including disease. Our High Priest was made like us in all things so that He could make atonement for our sins. He could pay the penalties.

And yet the Word did not become flesh as an adult shortly before His atoning sacrifice. He was born like every other person. In no way did He skip to the end to make His perfect sacrifice and yet avoid the common hardships of humanity. In this regard, it would be appropriate that He would experience physical illness so that He could identify with what His brethren go through. He had to live every moment, the good and the bad, just like everyone else, and then submit to the supreme travesty of being put to death by His own creation, even by His own tribe.

As one example of what Christ went through, Luke 22 and verse 44 records part of His time in the garden of Gethsemane.

Luke 22:44 Then His sweat became like great drops of blood. . .

There is a rare medical condition of sweating blood called hematidrosis, which happens when susceptible people are under great distress. We cannot say for certain that He had that condition, but at the very least it shows that the Son of Man was subject to stress-induced symptoms. It says that Jesus was in agony, an agony that produced physical symptoms. Now if He was subject to that condition, why could He not also be subject to a rapid heart rate, a dry mouth, a headache, or something even worse?

We are still in Hebrews, so we will go to one more scripture in this book. Please turn over to Hebrews chapter 4, verse 15. It says,

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

This verse is fascinating because of the word weaknesses, which is translated from the Greek *astheneia*. It is *Strong's* #769 if you want to search this out. The word can indeed signify weakness in the sense of limitation or inadequacy, but in well over half of the places it is used, it is translated as infirmity, sickness, or disease. So at the very least, this verse says that Christ can sympathize with our limitations or inadequacies in general. But it also

easily allows that He can specifically sympathize with our infirmities, sicknesses, or diseases because He was tried in every point in which we are tried. Being tried in one's health is a very common part of being human.

Thus the Scriptures leave the door open for Jesus not to have been the picture of human health. Now some may object to this on the basis of the connection between sickness and sin. Jesus was sinless, so He should not have been sick. However, by that reasoning, He also should not have died because He was sinless. Yet the very reason He was given a flesh and blood body was to be a substitutionary sacrifice, not only for the death penalty, but also for bearing our sicknesses, as we will see in a moment. In terms of the connection between disease and sin, we have to remember what Jesus Himself said.

Please turn with me to John chapter 9, verse 1, the account of the man born blind. It says,

John 9:1-3 Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents' sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him."

And the disciples gave the prevailing view concerning the cause of disease. It was not an entirely incorrect view, but it was incomplete. There are many scriptures that illustrate the cause-and-effect relationship between sin and disease, and still more that show the relationship between repentance, forgiveness, and healing. So when one is considering the source of sickness or disease or infirmity, a good place to start is to evaluate if there is sin involved because that is what the Scriptures teach. However, as the Creator says here, it is quite possible for a man to have imperfect health that was not the result of his own sin. But before we hurry to let ourselves off the hook, we should also notice Christ's proviso here, which is that in such cases, the reason for undeserved affliction is so the works of God can be revealed in the man.

That was the case with the man who was born blind, and it could apply to Jesus Christ just as well if He were not in perfect health. It certainly would

not have been because of something that He did, but so the works of God would be revealed in Him, which they were. Please turn to Matthew 8, beginning in verse 16.

Matthew 8:16-17 When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses."

This incident was quite some time before His crucifixion, and yet even at that time in His ministry, it says He was bearing sicknesses. The quotation of Isaiah contains a parallelism in which the first phrase "took our infirmities" is reinforced by the second phrase which is "bore our sicknesses." Now the word translated "took" is *Strong's* #2983 and it has the sense of to receive to oneself. By itself, it does not mean to take away. Christ's taking of infirmities was more personal than simply sending them away. The language indicates He received them to Himself in some way.

And similarly, the word translated "bore" indicates that there was a burden of some kind. There is always personal effort involved in bearing something. Jesus was not removed or detached from those that He helped. These verbs indicate a close personal involvement in receiving infirmities in some way, in bearing the burden of sicknesses in some way, long before He was sweating blood and receiving the lash.

Now please turn with me to Isaiah 53 and we will see the Messianic prophecy that Matthew quotes here.

Isaiah 53:1-4 Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He [this is the Messiah] shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men [Notice this next one], a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was

despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

It is verse 4 that Matthew quotes in Matthew chapter 8. It says here He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, while back in Matthew it says He took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses. For whatever reason, the translators here decided to use general and non-specific terms, while the context back in Matthew requires a translation that points specifically to physical ailments. The words griefs and sorrows here are almost euphemistic. This translation conceals the physical application that Matthew drew from this prophecy. Now we will come back to verse 4, but just keep in mind that when this was quoted by Matthew, he understood the prophecy to be about sickness the Messiah would bear and not just general grief.

In verse 2 the Messiah is described as a tender plant, which actually means a twig, and as a root out of dry ground. A root out of dry ground gives the impression of a plant that is parched and weak rather than an abundantly healthy one. One paraphrase suggests a scrawny seedling, a scrubby plant, and a parched field. In no way does this suggest the appearance of vigor or robustness. These terms do not describe a thriving physical specimen. The rest of verse 2 maintains that the Messiah's appearance was not humanly attractive. He would not be a candidate for the cover of JQ, that is, Jewish Quarterly.

In contrast, the first Adam would have been the epitome of physical health, newly created and without any genetic degeneration. Good health is attractive, and yet the prophet says that there was nothing physically attractive about the Messiah. People were not drawn to Him just by looking at Him the way they are to someone in the glowing peak of health. Visually, the second Adam was at least ordinary, if not worse. His physical life was not one that anybody would envy.

That was not what the Father was pleased to give Him, and He accepted that, knowing that God was working out something far greater. His beauty and perfection and strength and vitality were in areas of life the people could not see. Now this really gets interesting in verse 3, where He is described as "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." The marginal note for sorrows

has the word pains. He was a man of pains. The word translated as grief is *Strong's* #2483, and it is overwhelmingly used to indicate physical sickness.

The Hebrew here literally says the Messiah was a man of pains and acquainted with sickness. Those terms can be used metaphorically, but again, the scripture allows for the possibility that He was accustomed to physical discomfort well before His crucifixion. At the end of verse 4, it foretells that the people would reckon the Messiah, it says, as stricken, which means plagued. Similarly, if you look down to verse 10 the second line contains that word grief once again. And there again the Hebrew literally says God made Him sick.

Isaiah foretold that the Messiah would not live up to the expectations of the people and specifically in His appearance and the hardship of His life. Remember that Matthew identified Christ as fulfilling this prophecy during His ministry, not in totality, but in starting to. It is a prophecy of His suffering service as a whole which culminated in His death but which was not limited just to the end of His life. If the extent of His physical suffering was limited to the hours of His crucifixion, and I do not downplay the depth of that suffering in the least, some might say He does not know what His people are going through.

But if He were made like us in all things regarding our flesh-and-blood condition, with genetics like ours, at least partially, that have been affected by the sins of previous generations, and He experienced the sicknesses and infirmities we do, then as High Priest He could fully identify with what it is like to live as a human—except for sinning. Regardless of the specifics and the timing, we can trust that He really does know what we are going through because He lived as we live. And this makes Him the perfect Advocate to take our petitions to the Father.