

THE ATONEMENT AND HEALING: WRESTLING WITH A CONTEMPORARY ISSUE

DR GRAHAM HILL
SENIOR LECTURER IN APPLIED THEOLOGY
MORLING COLLEGE, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

ABSTRACT

Some Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, and Charismatic movements have attempted to explicitly link physical healing with the atonement by appealing to Isaiah 53:4–6, Matthew 8:14–17, and 1 Peter 2:21–25. This theology has been felt in Evangelical circles also, especially in the majority world and among churches with charismatic leanings. This article simply asks, can a theology of healing be developed from these passages, and, if so, what do we mean by *healing*?

This article argues that while these passages may include physical healing, they do not guarantee it. These verses cannot be used to justify physical healing on demand. While the atonement includes the possibility of physical healing, especially in the Parousia, this healing cannot be demanded. It is only in the age to come that we are completely healed and receive our promised resurrection bodies. The article considers the relationship between a theology of healing and its relationship to our theology of the atonement. Our theology of the atonement can expand our understanding of the nature and scope of healing and its connections with the atonement and the incarnation.

I came to a personal faith in Jesus Christ in my late teens. Having grown up in a Reformed, Free Church, congregational tradition, I made a decision to follow Jesus in an Australian Pentecostal church. I quickly embraced both the biblical foundations of my childhood and the spiritual enthusiasm of Pentecostalism. Then, in my early twenties, I experienced a spiritual crisis. The Pentecostal church I attended taught that physical healing is guaranteed in the atonement, and that one only needs enough faith to be healed. I was told that the following formula guarantees physical healing: (1) The personal faith of the sick person, plus; (2) the faith of the believing congregation, plus; (3) the spiritual gift of the charismatic leader, plus; (4) the atoning work of Jesus Christ, plus; (5) the biblical guarantee of present physical healing. Even as a young person, I struggled to reconcile this with Scripture, modern medicine, and human experience. Then, in the early 1990s, two Pentecostal Christian leaders I knew died from cancer in the same year—and both of them were absolutely certain that God would heal them from their cancer in this life. As I watched their congregations try to make sense of their deaths (which was at complete odds with their theology), I decided that I would allow Scripture to speak for itself on this matter of the relationship between the atonement and physical healing.

Some Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, and Charismatic movements have attempted to explicitly link physical healing with the atonement by appealing to Isaiah 53:4–6, Matthew 8:16–17, and 1 Peter 2:24. This theology has been felt in Evangelical, Free Church, and mainline Protestant circles also, especially in the majority world and among churches with charismatic leanings. There have been rigorous debates around the associated theological, biblical, and pastoral issues. On one end of the spectrum are those who believe that physical healing is guaranteed in the atonement (e.g. A.B. Simpson, Kenneth Hagin, and Kenneth and Gloria Copeland). At the other end, are those who reject any such notion, and focus almost exclusively on

the way that the atonement deals with sin (e.g. B.B. Warfield, Merrill F. Unger, John MacArthur, and Richard Mayhue).

There is, of course, a long tradition of linking healing with the atonement—with variations on what is meant by *healing* and *atonement*. Roman Catholic theologians often have healing at the center of their view of atonement. The Patristic era produced atonement theories that were healing based (though to call them theories may be overstating the case), and this is also true of Eastern Orthodox theology—*theosis* being the key lens for such treatments. *Theosis* is the theology of spiritual and holistic healing and transformation, found in union with God and the attainment of his likeness—through purification of body and mind (*katharsis*), spiritual contemplation and illumination (*theoria*), and the union with and likeness of God found in sainthood (*theosis*). Among others, such understandings of the spiritual healing found in the atonement may be associated with Athanasius, Clement, Irenaeus, and Origen.

All this leads me simply to ask, “Can a theology of healing be developed from these three biblical passages, and, if so, what do we mean by *healing*?”

Millard Erickson introduces the arguments used for healing in the atonement. Those who make the case for physical healing in the atonement suggest that since sickness is a result of the Fall it is dealt with in the same way as the rest of the Fall’s results—through the atoning death and resurrection of Christ. They argue that in Matthew 8:16–17 the Gospel writer is linking Jesus’s healings with his work of sin-bearing (as in Isaiah 53:4–6). Some even see sickness (or some of it) as a direct result of sin—this view was common in ancient times, and in Jesus’s time. Therefore, the remedy is the same for both sin and sickness—the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While Erickson recognizes that, in general, sickness has its origins in the Fall, Jesus did not make a direct link between illness and an individual’s sin (see John 9:1–3), and his healings were not often connected with forgiveness of sin. The intimate connections made by some between illness and individual sin, and between healing and forgiveness of sins, is not justified by the biblical data.¹

So what do we make of the relationship between the atonement and physical healing when we examine Isaiah 53:4–6, Matthew 8:14–17, and 1 Peter 2:21–25?

ISAIAH 53:4–6

⁴Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.²

John Oswalt rightly argues that the principal theme of Isaiah is servanthood: “The servanthood of God’s people through whom his saviorhood is revealed to the world. This theme is made explicit at the outset in 2:1–5.”³ Chapters 1–39 lay the theological foundations for such servanthood, and chapters 40–66 explore

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 836–39.

² All references are in the TNIV.

³ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 7.

the implications of the *vocation of servanthood*. Chapters 49–55 consider the changes that are necessary within God’s people, “changes in relationship and in character if hope is to endure (48:18–19),” if “sinful Israel” is to become “servant Israel.”⁴

This brings us to substitution and atonement. John Oswalt writes that according to Isaiah 49:1–55:13, the *means of servanthood* is atonement. Sinful, broken, deaf, blind, and rebellious Israel cannot be made right with the Lord God (in relationship and character). God will send his substitutionary, delivering Servant to be punished for others, to suffer, heal, deliver, and atone. The Servant is the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The Servant will “give himself to be for and in Israel what Israel could never be in itself.”⁵ “The language of carrying and bearing sets the stage for the substitutionary understanding of the Servant’s suffering... The Servant is not suffering *with* his people (however unjustly), but *for* them.”⁶ The Servant secures for Israel what she cannot secure for herself. He is unjustly punished for the sake of her healing and deliverance, and so that she may enter the loving embrace of the Lord God, justice having been satisfied.

John Goldingay puts the references here to Israel’s wounding and healing in the context of the entire book of Isaiah, and of the entire Old Testament witness. In this light, the primary meaning is metaphorical. While the meaning is primarily metaphorical, it is not entirely metaphorical. They are suffering physically as a consequence of the Assyrians, whom God is using as the rod of his anger (cf. Isa. 10:5).

The chastisement takes the form of “wounding”, another link with 1:2–6, which emphasized that the people had received no treatment for their wounds. “Healing” then nuances well-being and constitutes another link with ch. 6, where v. 10 warned that they would never find healing (Lam. 2:13 also asks who could heal Jerusalem). Healing is also another exodus word (Exod. 15:26; see further Deut. 28:27, 35)... The servant is the means of that healing coming. The talk of wounding and healing in these passages puts us on the track of the significance of this image here: it suggests the restoration of a broken nation.⁷

Notice the first-person plural pronouns in this passage. We are rebellious and willful. He was crushed and he atoned for “our transgressions” and “our iniquities.” Because of his wounds we are healed, forgiven, justified, delivered, purified, and in right relationship with God. We are called to accept his substitutionary sacrifice, and to come to him in repentance and obedience. While physical sickness and healing is dealt with metaphorically in Isaiah 53:4–6 (illness and healing as metaphorical reference to sin-bearing and spiritual deliverance), there seems to be more than a metaphorical reference to sin-bearing here, but also a reference to actual sickness. So physical illness and healing seem to be here, even though this is not the primary intent or meaning of the passage (even though physical illness and healing is not the central concern of this passage, it seems to refer to healing from actual physical healing). The primary reference is to the healing of the wounded nation. However, are we to understand this as physical healing on demand in the present life?⁸ The passage does not bear that interpretation out.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

⁵ *Ibid.* 287.

⁶ *Ibid.* 386.

⁷ John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2005). 503.

⁸ John Oswalt, *Isaiah: The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text- to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003). 585; John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001). 304–5.

MATTHEW 8:14–17

¹⁴When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. ¹⁵He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. ¹⁶When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. ¹⁷This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases."

Christology is the central theme of the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is the Messiah (Christ), the promised Savior and Redeemer, the Son of God, and the Son of Man. Jesus is the anticipated King of the kingdom of God, the Judge, Lord, and Mediator of the divine presence.⁹ In the light of that christological purpose, Matthew recounts ten examples of Jesus' miracles in 8:1–9:38. "Matthew 8:1–17 shows Jesus' authority over sickness; 8:23–28 shows his authority over nature, demons, and paralysis; and 9:18–34 demonstrates his authority over disabilities and death."¹⁰ Jesus, the Savior, King, and Lord has authority over all creation and humanity, and we are called to recognize, obey, and declare that divine authority. Jesus' divine authority calls us to fully committed and obedient discipleship.

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law in Matthew 8:14–17 is another story that serves as an apology for Jesus's messianic claim (and illustration that he is the King over the kingdom of God). However, there are also implications here for Matthew's audience and for us. Craig Keener writes, "Matthew spends much of his narrative presenting Jesus as a healer because he expects his audience to experience Jesus as a continuing healer, as one who now holds all authority in heaven and on earth (28:18; cf. 9:35–38; 10:1; Rom 15:16; 1 Cor 12:9; 2 Cor 12:12; Gal 3:5; Jas 5:14–15)."¹¹

Atonement and physical healing may not be the primary reason Matthew recounts this story, or the other stories in Matthew 8. Matthew is keen to show that the messianic King is deeply concerned for the outcast, broken, marginalized, and "unclean." Matthew 8 follows this theme closely—Jesus touches, heals, dignifies, and cares for the leper (8:1–4) (*a physical outcast*), the non-Jewish Centurion (8:14–15) (*an ethnic outcast*), and a woman (8:14–15) (*a gender outcast*). Craig Blomberg makes this point central to interpreting the purpose of Matthew 8. "It may be, after presenting three cases of Jesus' potentially defiling himself ritually, that [Matthew] simply wishes to underline how Jesus was willing to become unclean in order to make others clean. The physical removal of the virus or bacteria would thus prove less significant than the spiritual removal of man-made distinction that ostracize certain kinds of people from the love of God and fellow humans."¹² Hence, "He took our infirmities and carried our diseases." We have to be careful, as we wrestle with the theme of physical healing in this passage, that we do not miss the author's real intent—to demonstrate Jesus Christ is the King who has all authority over creation and humanity, and who, furthermore, is concerned for the cleansing, dignity, and healing of the outcast (thus revealing the true nature of his Person and kingdom).

⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 61–71.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹² Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (The New American Commentary, vol. 22; Nashville, TN.: Broadman, 1992), 145.

Matthew 8:17 can be interpreted in a number of ways: (1) Jesus vicariously carried human sickness when he died on the cross (e.g. A.B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and some Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals).¹³ (2) Isaiah 53:4 refers metaphorically to sin-bearing, and Matthew applies the verse literally to Jesus's healing activity in Matthew 8 (e.g. Rowland V. Bingham, *The Bible and the Body*).¹⁴ (3) Both Isaiah 53:4 and Matthew 8:17 refer to "actual physical sickness and mental distresses rather than sins," and to an empathy with it, not a carrying of it (e.g. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*).¹⁵ (4) Both Isaiah 53:4 and Matthew 8:17 (ultimately) refer metaphorically to sin-bearing (e.g. Don Carson, *Matthew*: "Jesus' healing ministry is itself a function of his substitutionary death, by which he lays the foundation for destroying sickness... Jesus's healing miracles point beyond themselves to the cross").¹⁶

Some combination of the second, third, and fourth views seems best:

(1) Isaiah 53:4 is readily understood in metaphorical terms, as the next two verses clearly deal with sin, not sickness.

(2) There seems to be more than a metaphorical reference to sin-bearing here, but also a reference to actual sickness, and to Christ's empathy with it—as Millard Erickson notes, this moves the theological emphases from the atonement to the incarnation, or, in my view, means that our understanding of the atonement and the incarnation come to the fore in our theology of *healing* (how this works and what I mean by healing will be discussed later).

(3) Matthew frequently employs Old Testament texts in an illustrative fashion, rather than in the strict sense of predictions fulfilled (e.g. Matthew 2:15 [Hosea 11:1] about God's son called from Egypt; and 2:18 [Jeremiah 31:15] about Rachel weeping for her children).

Therefore, some combination of the second, third, and fourth views seems justified, which, possibly includes, but does not guarantee, physical healing (we can, of course, expect healing in the *Parousia*). This blend of views certainly expands our understanding of the nature and scope of *healing* and its connections with the atonement and the incarnation.

Don Carson asserts, Matthew 8:17 "cannot be used to justify healing on demand. This text and others clearly teach that there is healing in the Atonement; but similarly there is the promise of a resurrection body in the Atonement, even if believers do not inherit it until the *Parousia*. From the perspective of the NT writers, the cross is the basis for all benefits that accrue to believers; but this does not mean that all such benefits can be secured at the present time on demand, any more than we have the right and power to demand our resurrection bodies. The availability of any specific blessing can be determined only by appealing to the overall teaching of Scripture."¹⁷

Craig Keener provides an insightful treatment of the issues at hand when he writes:

Finally, Matthew informs his audience that healing was part of Jesus' mission, which God provided at great cost to Jesus (8:17)... The context in Isaiah 53 suggests that the servant's death would heal

¹³ A.B. Simpson, *The Gospel of Healing* (New York, NY: Christian Alliance, 1880).

¹⁴ Rowland V. Bingham and W.H. Griffith Thomas, *The Bible and the Body: Healing in the Scriptures* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007).

¹⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 840.

¹⁶ Donald A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 205–7.

¹⁷ Ibid. 207.

the nation from its sin (53:4–6, 8–9; cf. 1 Pet 2:22–25), a figurative usage (along with judgment) frequent in the prophets (13:15; Is 6:10; 57:18; Jer 3:22; 6:14; 8:11; 14:19; Hos 14:4; cf. 1QH 2.8–9; Sir 28:3; Pesiq. R. 44:8). But the broader context of Isaiah... shows God's eschatological concern for his people's complete wellness... suggesting secondary nuances of physical healing in 53:4–5 as well... The servant's suffering would restore to Israel eschatologically the benefits lost through sin... Thus Matthew cites Isaiah 53:4 to demonstrate that Jesus' mission of healing fulfills the character of the mission of the servant, who at the ultimate cost of his own life would reveal God's concern for a broken humanity. Matthew himself also recognizes that genuine physical healings can illustrate principles about spiritual healing (9:5–7, 12; 13:15)... Jesus' sacrifice to bear others' infirmities may also provide a model for the disciples; it appears elsewhere in early Christian parenesis (Rom 15:1–3; 1 Pet 2:20–24).¹⁸

The story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law in Matthew 8:14–17 is primarily christological in character—it demonstrates Jesus' messianic mandate, fulfillment, authority, and concern (especially his love for the outcast).¹⁹ Even the quotation of Isaiah 53:4 is a christological device, a “fulfillment formula quotation” designed to “show that what is occurring in these healings is the fulfillment of the OT.”²⁰ Jesus is the Servant of the Lord, and he is about the ministry of healing, deliverance, and atonement, and the redefinition of reality through the values and priorities of his kingdom. Jesus identifies with the leper, the vulnerable, the outcast, and “humanity in its suffering.”²¹ This story is not so much about physical healing as it is about the *person* and *ministry* and *compassion* of Jesus Christ. “Is 53:4 guarantees no one healing in the present age. What is guaranteed is that Christ's atoning death will in the eschaton provide healing for all without exception. The healings through the ministry of Jesus and those experienced in our day are the first-fruits, the down payment, of the final experience of deliverance.”²²

1 PETER 2:21–25

²¹To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²²“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” ²³When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”²⁵ For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

The primary theme of 1 Peter is discipleship to Jesus Christ. Its purpose is to exhort and encourage Christians facing persecution, and to guide these Christians in matters of Christian identity, calling, hope, and the imitation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:21–25 is essentially about *imitatio Christi*—imitating and following the example of Jesus Christ. He left us an example to follow. He set an example of integrity in suffering characterized by uprightness, purity, honesty, and trust. He refused to retaliate, but, instead, entrusted himself to the One who judges justly. He did all this for us, bearing our sins, healing us, enabling us to

¹⁸ Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 273.

¹⁹ Note also the background of Isaiah 35:5–6 for understanding the christological import of Jesus' healing.

²⁰ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (ed. Bruce M. Metzger; Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33A; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 211.

²¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. 2: *Commentary on Matthew VIII–XVIII* (The International Critical Commentary; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 38.

²² Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 33A, 211.

imitate him, helping us live for righteousness, and drawing us back to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.

Jesus Christ serves as an example for us, but he is more than an example—he is our Saviour, Redeemer, Healer, Shepherd, and Overseer of our souls. He suffered and died not only as our example but also as our Lord and Saviour. We have gone astray, but he has brought us back to God. We are sick with sin, rebellion, and unrighteousness, but he has healed, restored, and made us righteous in the atoning incarnation, suffering, cross, and resurrection. We were subject to God's judgment, but he has given us unmerited, underserved mercy, righteousness, healing, and grace.

1 Peter 2:21–25 is not primarily about physical healing, and it is possible to say that this passage is not about such physical healing at all. It is about the imitation of Christ, following his example of integrity in suffering, and finding in him our source of righteousness, shepherding, mercy, and healing from the bondage and curse of sin. As the passage says, “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” “Like Isaiah before him, Peter uses physical healing as a metaphor for religious conversion, as he will explain in v 25 (in the Gospel tradition, cf. Mark 2:17; Luke 4:23).”²³ Jesus bore our sins vicariously on the cross, and we are now healed, that is, dead to sin, rebellion, and unrighteousness. Jesus's innocent suffering bears our sin, and he is our example of non-retaliation and endurance in suffering. Christ's atoning death provides an example for us in suffering, but also the solution to our waywardness, woundedness, and unrighteousness.²⁴ Peter Davids puts it well: “We no longer live that way. Instead, our lives are characterized by ‘righteousness,’ that is, the ethical life-style about which Peter has much to say. The salvation in Christ is not just a freedom from future judgment or from guilt, but a freedom from the life of sin and a freedom to live as God intends.”²⁵

In summary, our interpretation of Isaiah 53:4–6, Matthew 8:14–17, and 1 Peter 2:21–25 may include physical healing, but does not guarantee it. Even though there is certainly healing in the atonement (present healing, from time to time, and ultimate healing when Jesus Christ returns), these verses cannot be used to justify a theology of physical healing on demand.

²³ J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker; Waco, TX: Word, 1989), 149.

²⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier and Eldon Jay Epp, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 203.

²⁵ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 113.

HEALING, INAUGURAL ESCHATOLOGY, AND THE RESURRECTION

While the atonement includes the possibility of physical healing in the present, this healing cannot be demanded, “any more than we have the right and power to demand our resurrection bodies.”²⁶ It is only in the age to come that we are completely healed and receive our promised resurrection bodies. As Craig Blomberg puts it, “Charismatics have regularly appealed to [Matthew 8:17] in maintaining that there is healing for physical maladies in the atonement. Inasmuch as the healings consistently function as pointers to God’s in-breaking Kingdom, one should expect the present blessings of God’s reign at times to include miraculous recovery from illness. However, to require such healing of God this side of eternity loses sight of the future aspect of the Kingdom. Only in the world to come will sickness and death be banished altogether from believers’ lives. Claims that so far all who were sick in Jesus’ presence seem to have been cured must be balanced with the data of John 5:1–15, in which Christ selected only one of many sick people to receive healing. Nor is it adequate to reply that the others did not ask either. Jesus frequently worked miracles to create faith where it was not already present (e.g., Mark 4:35–41; 5:1–20), even while refraining from such activity in similar situations elsewhere (e.g., Mark 6:1–6a; 8:11–13). There is physical healing in the atonement for this age, but it is up to God in Christ to choose when and how to dispense it. Perfect healing, like the believer’s resurrection body, ultimately awaits Christ’s return.”²⁷

Inaugural eschatology affirms that the kingdom of God has *present* and *future* dimensions. The end is already here and the kingdom is already inaugurated, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but it is yet to be consummated. It is *now but not yet*. The ultimate future reality was brought into the present through the person and work of Jesus Christ, as he demonstrated the *current presence* of the kingdom in his life, death, and resurrection—yet it is only in the *final consummation* that all disease, suffering, conflict, and death are no more (Revelation 21:4). John Dickson writes that in the ministry of Jesus,

Evil was overthrown, frail bodies restored, nature itself was put right. The “kingdom of God” has in *miniature* come upon them... As much as the miracles point to Jesus’ compassion and authority, fundamentally, they preview the renewal of all things in the kingdom to which Jesus invited his hearers... Christian hope is thus *confidently restless*: it praises God for the preview (in Jesus’ life) and pleads for the finale (in the “kingdom come”), when evil will be overthrown, humanity healed, and creation itself restored.²⁸

Because the kingdom is *present*, believers are healed from their sin and unrighteousness, and are physically healed *from time-to-time*. Because the kingdom is *future*, our ultimate physical healing, like our resurrected bodies, awaits the final, decisive, *future reality*. The life, kingdom message, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ witnesses to this, so we are “confidently restless,” awaiting the final restoration of all things, including our bodies. Bodily healing is integrally associated with the atonement, just as is every other blessing promised us by God. However, while people experience divine healing on occasions, and this is clearly related to Christ’s atonement for our sins, “God has not seen fit to shower us with all physical blessings now in the way he has with spiritual blessings (Eph 1:3); we await the final consummation of God’s

²⁶ Carson, *Matthew*, 207.

²⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 22, 145.

²⁸ John Dickson, *A Spectator's Guide to Jesus: An Introduction to the Man from Nazareth* (Sydney: Blue Bottle, 2005), 44–45.

redemptive plan, and this is our “blessed hope”—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13).”²⁹

We are inspired, comforted, and given hope by both the present and future dimensions of the kingdom, that is, its full, inaugurated, and eschatological nature. Jesus and the NT authors characterize this present age as one characterized by grief, sinfulness, struggle, and evil, along with signs of the redemptive in-breaking of the kingdom of God. The age to come, however, will be one of joy, holiness, peace, rest, and comfort. The kingdom of God in the age to come will be the dwelling of the righteous and the healed.³⁰ The whole created order will be transformed and healed so that it reflects its original glory,³¹ we will live a transformed existence characterized by resurrection life,³² fellowship will be restored with God,³³ and this restoration is likened to a wedding feast.³⁴ Such descriptions of the present and future kingdom of God give us hope in the midst of pain and struggle, and encourage us to continue proclaiming the good news of the kingdom—for its presence and coming are realities orchestrated by the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord.

THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF HEALING

The church needs to develop a broader understanding of *healing*, and its relationship to our theology of the atonement. If Craig Keener is right and “Matthew informs his audience that healing was part of Jesus’ mission, which God provided at great cost to Jesus (8:17),” we need to consider the various dimensions of healing associated with the atonement (and with Christ’s empathetic connection with our human condition in the incarnation), while recognizing that ultimate healing is in the *Parousia*. We need to explore what it means for us to experience physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, and other *healing*, thanks to the atoning life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We need to be careful here. Atonement is primarily about cancellation of guilt, about God’s work in liberating individuals, the church, and the created order from guilt and sin. However, our theology of the atonement can expand our understanding of the nature and scope of *healing* and its connections with the atonement, the incarnation, and the resurrection. We have seen that physical healing is available to all through the atonement, but, thanks to the *already but not yet* nature of the kingdom, it is not available to all in this present life. It is only guaranteed in the age to come. Douglas Moo concludes that, “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. Indeed, as we have seen, the NT gives reason to think that triumph over physical disease, like triumph over physical death, will not come for most believers until the future

²⁹ W. Kelly Bokovay, “The Relationship of Physical Healing to the Atonement,” *Didaskalia* 3 (1991): 37.

³⁰ Matthew 5:20; 7:21; Mark 9:47.

³¹ Matthew 19:28.

³² Luke 20:34–35.

³³ Matthew 5:8; 25:21, 23.

³⁴ Matthew 22:1–14; 25:1–12.

redemption of the body.”³⁵

Although ultimate bodily healing is in the resurrection of our bodies, we should also acknowledge that God is able to heal bodily if he chooses to do so. Therefore, we should not neglect to pray for those who are sick. However, we also need to explore the nature of *healing* associated with the atonement in its broadest sense—liberation from sin, restoration of relationships, freedom from addictions and slavery, rejection of idolatries, and peace, freedom, and joy in the emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of our lives. As a sign, foretaste, herald, and witness to the *now but not yet* kingdom, the church participates in this healing ministry, for the sake of Jesus Christ and his eschatological mission in the world. The church is called to demonstrate this healing in its corporate life and ethics, its public witness and service, and in its faithful pursuit of the healing mission of God. The church does this best with a mature, biblical view of the kingdom of God, and this kingdom’s *present* and *future* dimensions.

³⁵ Douglas J. Moo, “Divine Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel,” *Trinity Journal* 9 (1988): 204.