

DOES THE ATONEMENT GUARANTEE PHYSICAL HEALTH IN THIS LIFE?

There's an idea I've heard repeatedly over the past several years. I believe most of the people who have developed and spread this idea have been sincere believers in Jesus, sincerely trying to find hope for hurting people. I thank God for their faith, their compassion, their boldness, and their willingness to try to mine truth from the Scripture. I also believe – and at least one network news program has proven it incontrovertibly – that some of the leaders of the movement have been money-grubbing charlatans, selling fake healing to gullible people for the sake of dishonest gain. And I have to honestly say that even the sincere leaders and their sincere followers are sincerely confused.

Why do I have to say this? Because God has commanded me to. No, I didn't hear a voice – but I did read the Bible.

2 Timothy 2:11-15 Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him. If we disown Him, He will also disown us; if we are faithless, He will remain faithful, for He cannot disown Himself. Keep reminding them of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2 Timothy 2:23-26 Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

2 Timothy 4:1-5 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Titus 1:9-11 [An elder] must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

Am I writing this paper and quoting these verses because I think anyone who buys into this idea (that the Atonement guarantees physical health in this life) must be on the way to making a shipwreck of his faith? Of course not. I'm writing this because it's the little foxes that spoil the vineyard. They, too, need to be caught – as surely as the roaring lions must be silenced. Yet I do have this concern: this errant idea has made shipwreck of some people's faith, and will continue to do so here and there until it's finally laid it to rest.

Misunderstandings of Isaiah 53:4-5 and other passages

This errant idea is a classic example of a doctrine that's built on a faulty understanding of just one brief passage – Isaiah 53:4-5. Of course, proponents of the idea are quick to point out that portions of the passage actually appear two other times in the Bible, namely in 1 Peter 2:24 and in Matthew 8:17. But that's an objection that backfires, as we'll see presently.

These verses do indeed show that there is a real connection between sin and sickness, and between forgiveness and healing. And there are many places in the gospels where forgiveness and healing go hand in hand – too many and too familiar to need us to list them all. There can be no question that there are connections between the Atonement and healing. What those connections are, though, none of the verses spells out. The full picture must be painted by the whole Scripture, starting with all of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, along with Peter's marvelous summary and application of the issue in 1 Peter 2:18-25.

So here's how we'll proceed. Before we actually get into the meat of the biblical considerations, I'll address some secondary, but still important, issues: doctrinal problems to be avoided, practical disasters to be averted, and biblical passages to be investigated.

Doctrinal problems raised by these misunderstandings

Much of this misunderstanding could be cleared up simply by understanding what the Atonement is and what it does. The Hebrew word for “atone” is כָּפַר (*kaphar*). While it has been suggested that the basic meaning of the word is “to cover” sin, there is better evidence to suggest that the basic meaning of the word was “to remove” sin by the sacrifice of a substitute. The Greek word for “atonement” is ἱλασμός (*hilasmos*). It refers to the “satisfaction” of God’s wrath against sin by sacrificing a substitute. In any case, atonement is about dealing with our sin problem before God.

The atonement that was made by the blood of animals under the Old Covenant was only a partial and provisional solution to the sin problems of God’s people. It was only a shadow and a promise of what was to come (see Hebrews 9:11-15 and 10:1-14).

On the other hand, the final Atonement that Christ worked out on the Cross was far more than a promise. Even for those who die lost, it had a benefit. For every human being who had ever been or would ever be conceived, the Atonement purchased a brief moment of respite from the full wrath of God. Every person ever born owes every day, every delight, every heartbeat to the Cross of Christ. God had promised Adam that in the moment he first truly transgressed, he would go off instantly to eternal death. With a threat like that hanging in the air, it is only in the shadow of the gory spectacle of the Cross that there could be any clemency at all – for Adam or any of his children. Paul says as much in Romans 3:25. This general Atonement did not save all men for all of time, but it did save all men for some time. It is what allows a stony-hearted and lifelong rebel against God to see some good days and taste some sweet delights during this life – although he will taste nothing but wormwood on the other side of death.

Yet the Atonement did so much more for those who were chosen to believe. It made full and final payment for all the sins of God’s elect people. It was the supreme and all-satisfying offering for our guilt, the complete and irreversible satisfaction of every drop of God’s wrath against our sin – including our sins of impenitence and unbelief. And so it could not leave us unrepentant and unbelieving. It demanded the sending of the Spirit to create and sustain and progressively perfect true faith in Christ within our hearts, so that we who are elect are true believers, and we who are true believers are the elect. This is the classical Reformed (that is to say, biblical) understanding of Christ’s Atonement.

Clearly, the idea we’re discussing (let’s call it the “Physical Health In This Life” idea, or PHITL for short) raises at least three problems for its adherents. The first is not a problem for me, but I suspect it is for some of them. If there is guaranteed health only for believers in the Atonement, that suggests that the Atonement was only for believers – not for unbelievers. That’s called “limited atonement” or “particular redemption,” the doctrine I just laid out for you, and not many folks in America are willing to believe it – despite the fact that the Bible clearly teaches it. Obviously, this doesn’t present a real problem for me, since I accept the biblical teaching of particular redemption. How a PHITL follower would deal with it, I don’t know.

A second (and actual, not merely rhetorical) problem with the PHITL idea is that it severs the gift of faith from its root – the Atonement. PHITL proponents claim that it’s a lack of faith that prevents some Christians from receiving the healing that is theirs by virtue of the Atonement. (Some make the claim that it’s not a lack of faith that’s the problem, but unbelief. But that’s blatant doublespeak. Unbelief is a lack of faith.) The great inconsistency here is that if health is ours by virtue of the Atonement, so is faith: saving faith, transforming faith, persevering faith, overcoming faith, (which four belong to all true believers). So is the unique ministry gift of faith that the Spirit gives to some believers, but perhaps not all. If all true believers have healing because of the Atonement, why do they not also all have the faith to claim that healing by virtue of the Atonement? Do the PHITL crowd say that man’s unbelief stifles the work of God? Well and good: you can even find something like that in the Bible. But what is the ultimate reason God does not grant a greater portion of faith to those people? Beneath and behind all of the struggles and striving to believe that we all go through, the ultimate truth is that all real faith is a direct and unmerited gift from the Spirit of God. Why does He not give all the faith we’d like to have? 1 Corinthians 12:11 says that the Spirit gives the ministry gift of faith just as He pleases. Some get more; some get less. The Spirit decides who gets what. Ultimately, that’s true about every kind of faith. But if it’s unbelief that short-circuits healing, and the Spirit gives belief wherever He pleases, in whatever measure He pleases, what’s the unavoidable conclusion? The Spirit does not always choose to grant the faith that it would take to receive a supernatural healing. If the Spirit apportions blood-bought faith to us as He wills, He also distributes blood-bought healing to us as He wills. And that means it not always God’s will to heal. Sometimes, for His own loving purposes, He chooses to leave one of His children sick.

The third and most crucial problem is a problem of emphasis. Even if there were physical healing in this age guaranteed by the Atonement, the healing would not be the big deal. When we talk about the Atonement, we should talk primarily about our own sin and God’s gracious forgiveness, and only mention issues of sickness and healing as a distant second. Yet the

PHITL folks are virtually incapable of keeping the main thing about the Atonement as the main thing in their preaching about the Atonement. And that's simply an egregious error of emphasis. How enamored the Corinthian Christians were with miracles and manifestations! Yet the stark reality of the Cross was too foolish and too offensive. We fall victim to their errors all too easily.

Practical disasters provoked by these misunderstandings

It's high irony that the PHITL folks, in the name of passion for the truth and compassion for the sick, end up distorting the truth and disturbing the sick so severely.

The TV healers show you the people whose impressionable and excitable constitutions can be manipulated to such a degree that their mysterious back pain goes away when they get "slain in the Spirit." And on the rare occasion God does do a real, verifiable miracle (and I'm sure that does happen), they get maximum mileage out of that! But what they don't show you are the lines of devastated people going away unhealed after the meeting, convinced that once again they failed to conquer their own unbelief and receive the healing that's been waiting for them ever since the Cross. Compassion? Scarcely!

And it's not just in stadium crusades that these crushing encounters take place. They happen in living rooms, on street corners, in Sunday School classes, and wherever else an overzealous PHITL *aficionado* can collar an unfortunate sick person. Here and there, people have been jerked out of wheelchairs, had their canes knocked out from under them, and who knows what else. This is neither compassion for the sick nor passion for the truth. This is madness.

Of course, most PHITL folks have enough sense and mercy not to do anything so blatantly abusive. They are sweet, sensitive, spiritual saints who want only God's best for their brothers and sisters. Yet their godly motives, coupled with their faulty doctrine, drive them to try to persuade other Christians to "claim their healing" by faith. And whether they mean for it to happen or not, people end up feeling confused, condemned, discouraged, and sometimes even disappointed or disillusioned. It's an unavoidable result of telling people God has promised something He hasn't really promised. This is a pressing issue in our church. I have multiple sclerosis. We have a member and a regular attender who both have muscular dystrophy, a little girl with cerebral palsy, and people with cancers, heart conditions, diabetes, and a host of other hurts. Dare we tell these people that God has promised a healing He hasn't really promised?

Biblical passages that help to clear up these misunderstandings

One way to approach this problem is to ask whether there were any seriously sick or chronically sickly believers in the New Testament. If there were, then we can safely surmise that the apostolic churches knew nothing of the doctrine, and therefore that the Apostles did not understand Isaiah 53:4-5 the way the PHITL folks do. And there were some seriously sick and chronically sickly believers in the New Testament era.

Philippians 2:25-30 But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow.

Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

Paul was an apostle, lacking no gift, with such a powerful healing gift that even bits of cloth that he had touched healed people all over the province of Asia. But he was worried that Epaphroditus was going to die, and that his own heart would be broken by it.

Why did not the mighty Paul simply exhort his brother to rise up in faith and claim his healing from the Atonement? And then, why did he find it necessary to reassure the Philippian church about Epaphroditus? Did they not know that the Cross had already assured their friend of a complete healing?

Or if they didn't know, but should have known, why didn't Paul seize on what would have been a golden teaching moment and instruct them about the guaranteed healing that resides in the Atonement? The only conceivable answer to that question is that there is no guaranteed healing hidden in the Atonement. There wasn't then, and there isn't now.

1 Timothy 5:23 Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.

Timothy was the pastor of the church at Ephesus, the Cadillac church of the prosperous, populous province of Asia. He was sent there by Paul at a time when many seeming believers were deserting Paul's doctrine and the Ephesian church. He was young, but Paul believed firmly in his maturity and ability to handle the challenge.

Yet he was sick often, seemingly with gastrointestinal problems, perhaps related to the impure drinking water in Ephesus. If he was such a crackshot young pastor, a Green Beret among preachers, why did he have chronic stomach problems? Why could he not have simply grasped by faith the healing that was waiting for him in Christ's Atonement? Could it have been that he knew of no such doctrine?

Or was it his unbelief? Shall we accept the notion that Paul sent a man who was weak and small in faith to take the reins of a leading, but troubled, church? That makes no sense. And if it was an unbelief problem, why did Paul prescribe an oral antibiotic? Why didn't he just tell Timothy to exercise his faith more consistently? The only explanation is that Paul had never heard of the PHITL doctrine, either.

Timothy presents a troubling counterexample to the PHITL position. He was a great spiritual leader, a hero among the saints, but he was a chronically sickly man – just like many other mighty men of God throughout history.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

This is Paul himself – sick, weak, and unable to get healing. Whatever can the PHITL folks do with this passage?

One thing they do is deny that Paul was describing a physical ailment. They focus on the word "flesh," and say that Paul must have had a particular moral weakness that the devil was permitted to exploit regularly so as to keep Paul humble. Or they see it not as a moral weakness, but as a recurring attack from a particularly powerful demon who was allowed to oppress Paul severely and repeatedly throughout his life – perhaps by stirring up persecution.

Now those are plausible explanations, and there are even some other passages that could lend support to them, if you stretch things a little. But how do they help the PHITL position?

The PHITL idea rests on the premise that immediate physical healing is resident in the Atonement, and that therefore physical health is guaranteed for believers in this life. Its next most basic tenet is that God always wills to heal any physical ailment in a believer's body. It would be calloused and cruel of God to choose not to heal, and counterproductive to His own purposes in the Atonement, the PHITL folks reason.

Yet can we really say that the Atonement was designed to provide guaranteed physical healing along with the forgiveness of sin, but not necessarily to give guaranteed moral triumph or spiritual victory? Are there not many passages in the New Testament that clearly link the death of Christ to the defeat of sin and Satan and their power in our lives? Do they not both outnumber and outweigh Matthew 8:17? Is not the promise of forgiveness in the Cross closely linked with the promise of protection from our enemies?

How would it have been any less cruel of God to deny Paul deliverance from a moral weakness, or a spiritual oppression, or brutal abuse, than to refuse him healing of a physical ailment? Indeed, the character of the man as revealed in his writings would indicate that an unconquerable moral or spiritual problem would have been far more devastating to him than an unhealed physical affliction. (The attacks of men, on the other hand, seem not to have fazed him very much at all.) So if we want to understand things in a way that will leave God looking less cruel to Paul, we're going to have to take this passage as referring to a physical condition. (Not that I'm worried about rescuing God's reputation for goodness and mercy from the sniveling accusations of self-centered, self-obsessed, self-worshipping little human bugs, constantly and blasphemously accusing Him of being cruel. Paul's own fine disdain for those impudent accusations is expressed eloquently in Romans 9:14-24.)

When we come to this passage, do not our minds naturally take it as referring to a physical disease? Are we not drawn automatically to the memory of how God used Satan to afflict Job – possibly for the same purpose, that of humbling His servant? Are we not also reminded that the savage scars and more systemic ravages of the repeated beatings and stonings Paul endured remained with him for the rest of his life, and became for him a kind of badge of honor and seal of his authenticity (see Galatians 6:11)? And then, we are told explicitly in Galatians 4:13-15 that Paul's initial preaching of the gospel to the Galatians was somehow brought about because of a physical weakness or affliction he was enduring. The text here is clear. Paul was sick when he first met the Galatians, sick enough that he was afraid that his problems would hamper his efforts in the gospel. Yet the gospel went forward, not because of the miraculous way in which Paul "took authority" over his illness, but because the marvelous way in which the Spirit of God opened the Galatians' hearts to accept Paul and his message in spite of his problems.

The most natural, unforced way to understand these passages is to see that Paul had at least one physical problem that the devil was allowed to use to torture, tire, discourage, and humiliate him. What that problem was, or what they were, who can say for certain? But don't miss the most telling point of this passage, because it has something crucial to say to the whole PHITL mindset. It is this: God is far more committed to making us effective in His service – by whatever means He deems necessary – than He is concerned about making us comfortable in our lives. And He's not at all worried about appealing to our preconceived ideas of divine kindness. He will be compassionate how He sees fit, where He sees fit, for His own gracious (and usually inscrutable) purposes. If we fear Him and love Him and trust Him, we'll join Jeremiah in proclaiming His faithfulness in the midst of our worst disasters.

A right understanding of Isaiah 53:4-5

Of course, the central passage we must consider is Isaiah 53:4-5. The passage says,

Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.

That is the passage the PHITL people are so badly mishandling. But how do we understand the passage? Do we pray for a direct, mystical revelation of its meaning? Do we start with our preconceived notions about Matthew 8:17 and/or 1 Peter 2:24, and then let those preconceptions tell us what Isaiah means by healing? Or do we let Isaiah himself tell us what he's talking about when he talks about healing? I say we let Isaiah explain himself.

Isaiah speaks of healing six times in his prophecy: here in 53:4-5, and in five other places. Those five other places can tell us a lot about what Isaiah is talking about when he talks about healing. The five other passages are listed below, along with some brief observations about them.

Isaiah 6:8-13 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

He said, "Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be **healed**."

Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And He answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

The healing in view here is a healing of the people of God. That healing is not for the whole visible nation of Israel, but for the faithful Remnant who make up the true Israel (see Romans 9:6). It is a healing of forgiveness and restoration. It probably will include some physical healing, but it seems mostly to refer to spiritual, moral, and social healing. And it's for the Remnant as a whole. It may not have identical benefits for each individual believer within the Remnant.

Isaiah 19:21-22 So the LORD will make Himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the LORD. They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the LORD and keep them. The LORD will strike Egypt with a plague; He will strike them and **heal** them. They will turn to the LORD, and He will respond to their pleas and **heal** them.

This is physical and societal healing that springs from a spiritual healing from God, when He grants repentance to Egypt. Again, this is the healing of a people, perhaps an entire nation. Of course that would have profoundly blessed effects on an individual level. But it is not first and foremost an individual thing. It's a corporate blessing that's being offered here. I should add that this may have been only an offer, not a promise. There's no record that it ever happened.

Isaiah 30:26 The moon will shine like the sun, and the sunlight will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven full days, when the LORD binds up the bruises of His people and **heals** the wounds He inflicted.

Again, this is corporate healing for the chastisements that God has inflicted on His wayward people. We know from the context that those calamities include droughts, defeats, diseases, disasters, and damnation. All of those things will be healed for the faithful Remnant who turn from the sins of their countrymen and follow the ways of their Creator.

Isaiah 57:15-21 For this is what the high and lofty One says—He who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint

before me—the breath of man that I have created. I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways.

I have seen his ways, but I will **heal** him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace, to those far and near,” says the LORD. “And I will **heal** them.”

But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

Once again, the healing here is the healing of God’s faithful Remnant, turning them from their senseless sin and delivering them from the difficulties they have brought upon themselves. It is not primarily a healing of individual ailments that is promised, although doubtless many individuals will have sicknesses healed when this restoration happens.

Isaiah 58:1-12 “Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your **healing** will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and He will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

Yet again, we must note that this is the healing of the spiritual, moral, societal, and physical ailments of God’s chosen Remnant. And once more, we must note that this has never yet fully happened, so far as we know. Neither the national, visible Israel nor the spiritual, true Israel (that’s us) has ever turned away from greed and oppression as this passage demands.

We should see that God began to restore and heal His people when He sent His Son to be our Messiah and Savior, and to enlarge His people to include many from among the Gentiles. That is why Jesus’ preaching, teaching, converting, forgiving, renewing, and healing ministry was called a fulfillment of these prophecies. Yet the moral restoration of God’s people has not yet occurred on the scale Isaiah foretold. We are still all too full of empty words and sorrowless fasts and meaningless religious observances.

We care little to “loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke.” We are reluctant to share our food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter. When we see the naked, we are slow to clothe him, and quick to turn away from him, sometimes even if he’s a brother in the Lord – “our own flesh and blood.” We have not “done away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk.” In fact, we are quick to blame the poor for their own poverty, condemning them for their indolence and congratulating ourselves for our industry. And so we have not spent ourselves in behalf of the hungry nor satisfied the needs of the oppressed.

If we were to find ourselves doing that, with wisdom and care and discernment and faithfulness in stewardship and open eyes to the realities of human nature, yes, but also with joy and hope and passion and a willingness to risk and even lose for the sake of the lost, that would be healing. And if we were to see many of the wretched lost in Dundalk come to Christ for forgiveness and restoration and even a miracle or five, that would be real healing. That would be the healing that Isaiah was talking about, and the real healing that Jesus was ultimately after – and still is.

The current misunderstanding of Isaiah 53:4-5 – that the Atonement guarantees physical healing in this life – is out of step with Isaiah’s understanding of his own words. If you read the whole Old Testament, you’ll find that Isaiah’s fellow prophets also would be unable to recognize this spin on the healing of God’s people. They, too, would see it as primarily a corporate healing of the people’s spiritual and moral sickness – with any individual, physical healings coming as a secondary blessing of true revival.

Sadly, the PHITL idea is also out of step with most Christians’ understanding of passage – believers ancient, medieval, and modern. Most Christians (along with most of the pre-Christian and/or non-Christian rabbis as well) have understood Isaiah’s healing passages as referring to the healing of the ravages of God’s judgment on sin. It is the restoration of God’s faithful, chosen Remnant to a right relationship with their God through repentance and forgiveness.

At the same time, we should be careful to note that this does not mean there is no promise of physical healing in the Atonement. Isaiah’s words in 53:4-5 leave little doubt that he has literal, physical sickness in mind – as one of God’s many chastisements against the sins of His people.

It’s interesting, and I think helpful, to note that the pre-Christian rabbis almost entirely spiritualized Isaiah 53:4 in their Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint. The New Testament writers routinely quote from the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew, just as this paper quotes from the NIV rather than the original languages. Yet Matthew felt compelled to use his own, more literal, translation when he quoted Isaiah 53:4 in Matthew 8:17. God didn’t want the healing entirely spiritualized. He wanted us to know that it was also to be physical.

The healing that really is in the Atonement

One thing is certain from Matthew 8:17. The former tax collector understood Isaiah’s words in 53:4 as a clear prophecy of Jesus’ healing ministry in Palestine. Matthew’s passage reads,

When 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. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.”

There really is healing in the Atonement, it would seem. But we should think this through carefully. It’s certainly curious that Matthew has Isaiah’s prophecy of healing being fulfilled before the crucifixion: what does that tell us? I would suggest it tells us at least two things.

First, the secondary healing benefits of the Atonement were operative before the Atonement event ever transpired, just as the primary forgiving benefits of Christ’s Atonement had been washing away sins ever since God forgave Adam and clothed him in the skin of an animal – a type of the final Sacrifice that was to come.

Second, since the secondary healing benefits of the Atonement were available before the Atonement ever took place, they were nothing new on the scene of redemptive history. And that tells us that we should not imagine that the Atonement event unleashed some mysterious pent-up healing power. Rather, the Atonement gave and gives God the freedom to ignore His wrath for a time and do good, even to rebels who deserve only hell. When He pleases, He even heals them.

What Matthew 8:17 does not say is that there is guaranteed healing for believers in the Atonement. Rather, the verse tells us that there is the possibility of mercy for sinners in the Atonement, including the mercy of miraculous healing. Granted, the Atonement did for believers a glorious, eternal, invincible work of sin-removal, a work it did not do for those who were not chosen to believe. Yet it did win a brief respite for all sinners, so that now the rain – and the miracles – might fall on the just and the unjust alike. What is more, the verse tells us that there was a particular work of healing that God intended to do by the hands of His Son, to demonstrate to all that His Son had the authority to forgive sins, because soon He would offer Himself as the once-for-all payment for the sins of His people. This is real, literal, physical healing to be sure, but it’s not the PHITL idea, by a long shot.

One of the clearest and most telling summaries of how a right understanding of Isaiah 53:4-5 interfaces with the PHITL question comes from Don Carson. He is arguably the premiere evangelical New Testament scholar in America today. His comments on Matthew 8:17 in the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* include the following trenchant observations:

It should be stated that this discussion 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 [that is, the Second coming of Christ]. From the perspective of the N[ew] T[estament] writers, the Cross is the basis for all the 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. Modern Christians should avoid the principal danger of Corinth, [that is to say, an over-anxious and over-confident view of God's plan for history, a view] which demands blessings that may not be ours till the end of the age.

To which I say, "Amen, brother!"

The Atonement in 1 Peter 2

Peter's use of Isaiah 53:4-5 presents even more of a problem for the PHITL position than Matthew's does. His use of the passage is in 2:18-25 of his first epistle. That passage is reproduced in full here, hoping to make the meaning of the text plain by making the full intent of the context plain.

Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth." When 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.

He Himself bore our sins in His body on the Tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Does this use of Isaiah's words lend credence to the PHITL position? Hardly. Quite to the contrary, Peter is explicitly talking about the moral and spiritual renewal that is in the Atonement. He is exhorting believers to follow Christ's example in enduring unjust treatment without complaint, and using the Cross, with the precious Atonement it won for us, as the prime motivating factor. If Jesus suffered silently for us, resulting in the salvation of our souls by His substitutionary sacrifice of Himself, surely we can keep quiet when the boss is being a jerk. That's what the passage is about. Isaiah was speaking (a little) about physical healing, but in quoting him, Peter is speaking simply about how we can and ought to react to mistreatment.

The PHITL idea is nowhere to be found in 1 Peter 2.

A right understanding of Old Covenant and New Covenant promises

I believe one of the fundamental errors in PHITL thinking is that it mistakes the curse of sin for the curse of the Law. The curse of the Law was borne by Christ on the Tree, and the Old Covenant was fulfilled. The curses that the Old Covenant promised to national Israel for disobedience are no more, because the Covenant is no more, and national Israel (as God's visible people on earth) is no more. The reality of God's rejection of Israel, of which the curses were the specific historical expressions, is all that is left. And that's more than enough for those who somehow still choose to try to be under that defunct Covenant. But, praise God, it's nothing to fear for those who are in Christ. He has borne that curse for us! We need never fear God's rejection of us if we are in Christ.

Of course, the ending of the Old Covenant (and of national Israel as God's people on earth) also put an end to the blessings that were promised for their obedience: long life; big crops; lots of kids; good health; plenty of everything, and, above all, the land.

Two things should be noted about those Old Covenant blessings. First of all, I doubt those promises of blessing were promises that there would never be a faithful Jew who had to struggle with sickness or poverty (or have a barren wife or a stony field or a child who died). The Old Testament is full of faithful people who experienced all those troubles and more. Rather, the promises of the Covenant applied to the nation as a whole. *Per capita*, they could expect to be a far healthier and more prosperous and more long-lived people than the pagans who surrounded them – provided they remained true to Yahweh.

The promise of success in battle provides one good example. There were very few battles in which the Israelites sustained no casualties whatsoever, but when they were serving God, the kill ratios were incredible (you might check out the two battles for Ai, Joshua 7 & 8).

Another telling example of the fact that the covenant blessings were not primarily private, individual, or absolute is David's claim in Psalm 103:3. PHITL folks often point to this verse as an absolute promise of physical healing in every situation, as David identifies the Lord as the one "who heals all my diseases." But what did he mean by what he said? If he

meant that whatever healing he had ever received or would ever receive came ultimately from God, I say “amen.” If he also meant that someday he expected a resurrected body with no more disease or death, again I say “amen.” But did he mean that God had promised that he would never have an unhealed disease if he remained obedient? I cannot believe he meant that, because the last chapter of his life is not a portrait of a hearty, healthy man passing blissfully into a peaceful death. His circulation became so poor (perhaps from congestive heart failure or some other age-sensitive cardiovascular ailment) that he simply could not maintain his own body temperature any longer. (A lush young beauty named Abishag was recruited to be a full-time cuddling partner for the frail old warrior.) David died old, but he did not die healthy. There is no defensible reason for taking Psalm 103:3 as a promise of seamless health in this life for all believers.

To repeat: the Old Covenant promises of earthly blessing for faithfulness were more geared toward national blessing for national faithfulness. Obviously, that trickled down to the individual level in very practical ways. But still, it was a national thing first and foremost.

Second, though, and far more importantly, I have to wonder whether PHITL folks really believe those Old Covenant blessings are still promised in precisely the same way under the New Covenant. Let’s grant, for the sake of discussion only, that they were promises of individual blessing for individual faithfulness. So the question is, are PHITL folks really trusting God for the fulfillment of all those Old Covenant promises? Again and again, they quote Old Covenant promises for support of their beliefs about healing.

So again I ask, are they really trusting God to make good on all those promises literally, on an individual level? It’s more than just health, of course. How fertile are PHITL women? How long do PHITLers live? Do their gardens really grow bigger tomatoes? Do their enemies retreat before them? And are they truly expecting to take possession of a parcel of land in Palestine? Because otherwise they’re not really serious about trusting God for those Old Covenant blessings. Do they aver that they really don’t want lots of children, and are quite content to remain in the good ol’ U. S. of A.? I reply that if that’s true, they are scorning the covenant gifts of God and doing despite to His name. That is, if He really is expecting us Christians to claim the Old Covenant promises on an individual level and in the present day. (Of course, He’s not.) Of all the Old Covenant blessings on obedience, few were so precious as the promise of many sons, and undisturbed possession of the land of Palestine.

You see, if the PHITL folks say that since the curse of the Law is gone, the blessings of the Law (as they imagine them, usually including health and wealth) are ours to claim, they end up saying far more than they want to say.

PHITL followers are not alone in misunderstanding the nature of Old Covenant promises. There are actually some who insist that the state of Israel has the right to oppress and enslave the Palestinian people. They argue that since the land belongs to the children of Abraham forever, the Palestinians never had any right to be there. But that’s just bad – in fact, frankly unChristian – theology. The Scripture makes clear that the Old Covenant was never intended to be permanent. It was never more than a schoolmaster, preparing us for a day when the law of God could be written on our hearts. As regards the Promised Land, the Bible says that Abraham was looking for something far more than a piece of real estate in the Ancient (or modern) Near East:

Hebrews 11:8-10 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

The true Promised Land, even for Abraham himself, was heaven, not Canaan. And the true children of Abraham, according to Romans 4:1-25 and Galatians 3:6-14, are those who believe in Christ, regardless of their ethnic heritage.

Do you see what the PHITLers and others fail to realize? All of the promises of the Old Covenant were fulfilled in Christ Himself, when He came into the world and made atonement for the sins of His people. He bore the curse of the Law – which is the same thing as to say that He endured the curses of the Old Covenant. And He won for His people the fullness

of the blessings that were promised, and more besides. Yet the full realization of the final form of all of those blessings waits for the Lord's Return – seamless physical health included.

Has the curse of the Law been lifted? Of course it has. On the other hand, the Bible also speaks clearly of the curse of sin. It's been on the whole human race since the Garden, and the whole creation fairly groans with it. In this sin-cursed world, there is sickness, along with poverty and death and a thousand other evils. And although the curse of sin was also borne by Jesus on the Tree, it will not be finally lifted until... when? The return of Christ, according to Romans 8:16-25. It might also help to notice in those verses that there are some intensely unpleasant, unhealthy things that God plans for His elect to face in this age, but which can never separate them from His love.

Once again, Romans 8:16-25 forces us to face up to the truth that Don Carson has already rubbed our noses in: our full inheritance of the full blessings that the Atonement bought for us in the past will not take place until our Lord returns in the future. When that happens, we will finally be done with sin, because we will be made like Him, for we will see Him as He is. And we will finally be done with sickness, because our bodies will be transformed to be like His glorious body. For today, though, we are caught between the "already" and the "not yet," as some scholars so succinctly put it. Resurrection souls, free of sin and distress, and resurrection bodies, free of sickness and death, are guaranteed to come to us because of Christ's Atonement. But they're not here yet. They'll arrive when He arrives.

A right understanding of the role faith plays in healing

The PHITL idea relies much on the notion that faithlessness, or unbelief, can short-circuit the Atonement's healing power. They get this belief from a handful of isolated verses in the gospels, with one encounter in Nazareth as the key passage:

Mark 6:1-6 Jesus left there and went to His hometown, accompanied by His disciples. When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard Him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given Him, that He even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him.

Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." He could not do any miracles there, except lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them. And He was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.

Many PHITL folks find in this passage a warrant to believe that the Atonement of Christ relies on the faith of the Christian for the unleashing of its power. Such a notion is nothing short of blasphemous, because it makes the power of our Lord's death a response to the power of our faith. The Bible, though, says that our faith comes from Jesus' death and resurrection. His working for us (on the Cross) and in us (by His Spirit) is what created and sustains our faith. For the believer, the Atonement was what freed God's justice to unleash His mercy to send His Spirit to call us to the Cross to receive the salvation our Lord won for us there. Jesus died for us, not because of our foreseen faith (to be saved or healed), but out of His mere sovereign mercy alone. Faith does not unleash the Atonement; the Atonement creates faith.

Closer to the text, though, we can see other compelling reasons not to buy into the PHITL interpretation of this passage. If you notice what the passage says, you'll see at least two telling reasons to reject the PHITL interpretation: (1) Jesus was not totally unable to do miracles in Nazareth. Indeed, He amazed the townspeople with the miracles He did; and (2) The kind of unbelief that prevented Jesus from doing many miracles was not their sincere weakness of faith, but a cynical refusal of faith. We ought to think about these observations for a moment.

Suppose I say to my children, "I can't take you to Chuck E Cheese's. You haven't cleaned your rooms yet." Am I saying to them that their cleaning of their rooms is what would unleash my power to take them to the pizza place, and that I'm helpless to exert my power to take them until they empower me? Of course not! It's not that I'm unable to take them; it's that I'm unwilling. Two passages from Isaiah can help us see how God often speaks to His people in just this way.

Isaiah 50:1-3 This is what the LORD says: "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away. When I came, why was there no one? When I called, why was there no one to answer? Was my arm too short to ransom you? Do I lack the strength to rescue you? By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea, I turn rivers into a desert; their fish rot for lack of water and die of thirst. I clothe the sky with darkness and make sackcloth its covering."

Isaiah 59:1-2 Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.

When God's people have even a thimbleful of real faith, and cry to Him for mercy and deliverance, He answers. Yet for those who have no love to obey Him, and no faith to follow Him, He acts deaf.

The situation in Nazareth was much the same. The people scoffed at Him, not because He was unable to do miracles (the text says they knew full well He did miracles), but because their stubborn pride refused to recognize the kid from down the block as the Holy One of God. The parallel passage in Matthew shows what Mark meant when he said that Jesus could not do many miracles in Nazareth:

Matthew 13: 54 Coming to His hometown, He began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed.

"Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't His mother's name Mary, and aren't His brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all His sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at Him.

But Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor." And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Jesus' refusal to work mightily in Nazareth was simply an adherence to His own maxim: "Cast not thy pearls before swine." It was not an example of how God's freedom to move with power is limited by man's lack of faith. Nothing about God is limited by man, or unleashed by man.

There are many other places in the Scripture where a clear connection is drawn between faith and healing – or, for that matter, faith and any answer to prayer. Yet the faith that heaven smiles upon and acts upon is not a "faith" that brazenly claims things and commands things. Rather, it is a faith that humbly hopes and patiently trusts and quietly waits for the Lord to move. Such a faith rests in the knowledge that God will not abandon His people, but instead will work in and through their afflictions to bless their lives and display His own excellence.

Faith pleases God because faith testifies to His worth and excellence. And our pleasure in the display of His excellence is the whole reason He ever made us to begin with.

Concluding thoughts

I suppose I could try to be cute here and say something like "PHITL? Fiddlesticks!" But I have no desire to be cute. I'm writing this to expose and refute what I believe can be a dangerous distraction for modern churches, pulling their eyes away from the real import of the cross, and focusing their attention on secondary issues – to the hurt of the churches.

Even their way of trying to communicate their thoughts is problematic. Much as Jehovah's Witnesses and other cultists do, PHITL folks often rely on rambling and rapid-fire absolute pronouncements to get their point across. But those pronouncements often revolve around significant misunderstandings of a few select passages. Their mishandling of the Word of God needs to be pointed out.

The PHITL error is abusive to individuals, and distracting to churches. The sooner it is laid to rest, the better things will be for the Kingdom.

