

Ere the Blue Heavens Were Stretched Abroad

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Ere the blue heavens were stretched abroad,
From everlasting was the Word;
With God he was, the Word was God,
And must divinely be adored.

By his own power were all things made;
By him supported all things stand;
He is the whole creation's head,
And angels fly at his command.

But lo! he leaves those heavenly forms;
The Word descends and dwells in clay,
That he may converse hold with worms,
Dressed in such feeble flesh as they.

Mortals with joy beheld his face,
The eternal Father's only Son:
How full of truth, how full of grace,
The brightness of the Godhead shone!

The angels leave their high abode,
To learn new mysteries here, and tell
The love of our descending God,
The glories of Immanuel.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Tried With Fire: The Afflictions of Christ

Kevin T. Bauder

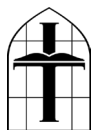
For all humans, believers and unbelievers alike, life in this world and in this present body is filled with pain. Mortality takes its toll both in us and around us. Children experience diseases and mishaps. Growing up entails meeting new forms of distress, and while we are still young we discover that not all anguish is physical. The more that we age, the more we discover the truth of Louisa May Alcott's observation that a life of beauty is only a dream.

When we think of the sufferings of Christ, our minds turn first to His passion—His death on the cross for our sins. Yet Christ's sufferings began at the moment of His nativity. He was born into a world and into a race for which suffering is a condition of fallen existence. To be human is to suffer, and the incarnate Christ was fully and completely human.

Consequently, we need to distinguish two senses of the sufferings of Christ. In the first (His *passion*) our guilt was imputed to Him as He propitiated God's justice with respect to our sins. In the second (His *afflictions*) He, while personally unfallen and sinless, "was made in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3) and entered fully and genuinely into the experience of humanity in a fallen world.

Quite apart from His redemptive work on the cross, Jesus could and did experience human afflictions. After forty days of fasting He felt the pangs of hunger (Matt 4:2). After extended exertion He grew weary (John 4:6). His own people misunderstood Him so badly that they thought He was crazy (Mark 3:21). Even His brothers did not believe Him (John 7:5). He shed tears and experienced grief (John 11:35; Isa 53:3). He knew what it felt like to have his closest friends betray and deny Him (Matt 26:16; Luk 22:54-62). None of these afflictions constituted the vicarious sacrifice in which Christ "bare our sins in his own body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24). Not all of Christ's afflictions were part of His passion.

At the same time, these afflictions were not disconnected from Christ's mission. Before He could go to the cross and suffer for our sins, He had to become a genuine human being. He had to live a human life in which He was tested "in all points" like we are. In other words, Jesus had to endure all of



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these afflictions before He could even qualify as our substitute and sacrifice. While His afflictions were not the sin-offering, they were nevertheless “for us” in an important sense.

These “afflictions of Christ” are what the apostle Paul references in Colossians 1:24. Paul chooses a term (*thlipsis* or *affliction*) that Scripture never uses for the expiatory sufferings of Christ. Rather, Paul is likely talking about the human sufferings of Christ in the world. These afflictions are related to Jesus’ redemptive work in that they provided the opportunity for Him to learn obedience (Heb 5:8), thus qualifying Him as our sin bearer, but they are not directly the sufferings that propitiated God’s justice. In other words, Christ suffered for our benefit in ways that did not directly secure our salvation. Consequently, even these ordinary, everyday afflictions take on deep significance.

The resurrection body of Christ has ascended into heaven, where He is seated in His Father’s throne (Rev 3:21). Nevertheless, He is still in the world in at least three ways. First, His divine omnipresence permeates all of the created order. As the Second Person of the Godhead He is in the world spiritually—and even though His human body is seated in heaven, His presence is the presence of a theanthropic person. Second, He is in the world through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, who mediates the person of Christ to His people. The indwelling of the Spirit and the presence of Christ are closely connected by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:9-10. Third, even though the human body of Christ is now in heaven, He still has a body in this world, but it is a spiritual body—and His body is the Church (Eph 2:22-23; Col 1:24). Somehow Christ lives and acts in the world through the members of this body, of which He is the head (Eph 2:22; 1 Cor 12:12-27).

Jesus suffered in His human body when it was on earth. Because His spiritual body, the Church, is still on earth, its members continue to suffer. This affliction arises partly because these members are unglorified humans in an unglorified world. It also arises partly because the kind of people who hated Jesus and rejected Him in His human body now hate Him and reject Him in His spiritual body, the Church. For both these reasons, Christians must expect affliction, hardship, privation, and suffering in the present order.

Like Jesus’ afflictions, however, our afflictions are more than just the rotten cost of living in a fallen world. Christ’s afflictions were important because they contributed to the ultimate wellbeing of believers, and in this sense they were “for us” even when they were not expiatory. In the same way, our afflictions as members of His body are also for the good of others. When we are afflicted (whether through calamity or persecution), our suffering affects other believers in ways that build them up. Our afflictions and our responses to them can encourage and inspire other believers. Our endurance in suffering can set an example for others. Furthermore, we can sometimes choose to absorb suffering that might have been endured by others. At least

part of what Christ’s non-expiatory afflictions began to do for others, our sufferings continue to do. In that sense, we “fill up” or complete what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ (Col 1:24). We do for one another what He is not on earth to do for us.

Affliction is part of every human life. For unbelievers, suffering often appears random and meaningless. For Christians, however, every bit of suffering is freighted with significance. Our hurts and distresses somehow continue the ministry of Christ to our brothers and sisters. God uses all our pain, and God always uses our pain.

Paul had never met the believers in Colossae. He did not evangelize them. He did not disciple them. As he sat in jail, however, he understood that his present suffering was for their benefit. Paul’s motto was that “to live is Christ” (Phil 1:21), so filling up the afflictions of Christ was meaningful to him. Knowing that his sufferings were “for you” (as he wrote to the Colossians) changed the very quality of the ordeal. From Paul’s point of view, affliction is ministry, and he embraced this ministry with joy. So might we.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
