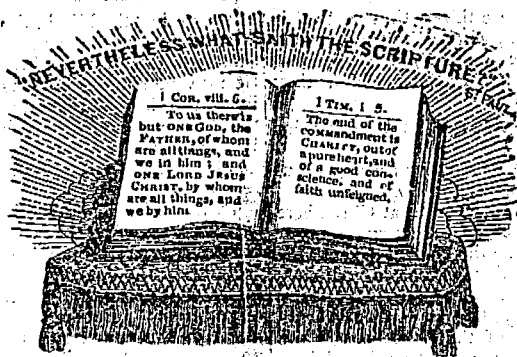


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CHRIST BARE OUR SINS.

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IN WHAT SENSE DID THE MESSIAH BEAR THE SINS OF MANY?

"The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isa. liii. 6.)

"For he shall bear their iniquities." (Verse 11.)

"And he bare the sins of many." (Verse 12.)

"So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many." (Heb. ix. 28.)

"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree." (1 Pet. ii. 24.)

All these passages are supposed to refer to Jesus Christ. The first of them will be separately considered; and then I shall endeavor to ascertain the meaning of the others.

"The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

To one accustomed to regard the atonement by Christ as a display of God's anger, this text will naturally be deemed a strong proof of the correctness of that doctrine. But it should be recollected, that the inspired writers were in the habit of regarding God's hand in all afflictions, by whatever secondary causes or agents they might have been produced. Satan and wicked men were agents in stripping Job of his property, his servants, and his children; yet Job piously eyed the hand of God in these events, and therefore said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away."

"What! shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord, and shall we not receive evil?" We may therefore say, The Lord laid on Job the iniquities of the Chaldean and Sabeen robbers, who were instruments of his affliction.

Joseph, too, was the subject of great affliction. Yet after his exaltation in Egypt, and while his brethren stood trembling before him, lest he should revenge their wrongs, Joseph thus addressed them: "As for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save much people alive." So the sufferings of the Messiah were according to the "determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God," though "by wicked hands" he was "crucified and slain." After his exaltation to the right hand of God, he might have said to the Jewish Sanhedrim, what Joseph said to his brethren,—"As for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save much people alive."

The salvation of sinful men was the purpose of God in both cases. But I see nothing of substituted penal suffering in either case, though in both one suffered for others.

Prior to exhibiting the passages in which others, besides the Messiah, are represented as bearing iniquities or sins, I may briefly state several senses in which one may be properly said to bear the iniquity of another, or of many others:—

1. A child may be said to bear the sins of his father, when by his father's dissipation and wickedness, he is caused to suffer poverty and affliction.

2. A good man may bear the sins of the wicked, when he suffers persecution from their hands. In this sense, Christ bore the sins of many; and some Christians believe, that this was the principal idea intended in the prediction, "and he shall bear the sins of many." This opinion derives some support from the fact, that the conduct of his persecutors was predicted in connexion with the words which have been quoted.

3. A good man may be said to bear the sins of others, when, like Lot, his righteous soul is grieved from day to day by their unlawful deeds. Thus too Christ doubtless bore the sins of many.

4. A good man may properly bear the sins of others, when with meekness he endures their insults and revilings, and still exercises towards them the spirit of forbearance and forgiveness. Who will deny that Christ thus bore the sins of many?

5. A good man may be truly said to bear the sins of others, when, on account of their sins, he is filled with concern for their souls, and not only prays for them, but freely exposes himself to reproach, peril, suffering, and death, that he may recover them from the ways of sin and misery. In this sense, all Christians must own that Christ bore the

6. An innocent man may be said to bear the sins of others, if their crimes are imputed to him, and he is caused to suffer in their stead. Such a result may be brought about in different ways. It may occur, by the cruel design and deceptive management of guilty agents. Having committed a capital offence, they may conspire and accuse an innocent person of the crime, and, by false testimony, cause him to be arrested, tried, convicted, and executed. A similar result may occur by mistake. A murder may be committed under circumstances which fix suspicion on an innocent man, and cause him to be arrested; the same circumstances may on trial be deemed adequate proof of his guilt; and thus, while perfectly innocent of the crime laid to his charge, he may be put to death as a malefactor.

There is still another way in which an innocent person may suffer instead of the guilty. For some reasons of sufficient weight in his own mind, an innocent person may offer himself as a substitute for a guilty father, son, or friend; the offer may be accepted by the government, and the innocent may suffer the punishment due to the guilty.

We have now a variety of senses in which one may be said to bear the sins of another. But the last case, stated under the last head, illustrates more nearly than any other, the sense in which a vast multitude of Christians have supposed that the Messiah bore the sins of many. We have then to inquire, whether this hypothesis is warranted by a fair comparison of scripture with scripture. Various cases will therefore be brought to view, in which one is represented as bearing the sins or iniquities of another.

First. Under the Mosaic dispensation, Aaron and his sons were appointed to bear the iniquities of the Israelites. Thus said God to Moses, "Thou shalt make a plate of pure gold, and grave upon it, HOLINESS TO THE LORD, and it shall be upon Aaron's forehead, that Aaron may bear the iniquity of the holy things, which the children of Israel shall hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall be always upon his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord." Exod. xxiii. 36—38.

The priests were also required to eat of the meat of "the sin-offering in the holy place," as being given to them "to bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord." Lev. x. 17.

Now what do we perceive in either of these cases, which has the least appearance of divine anger, punishment, or substituted suffering? Was the anger of God manifested towards Aaron or his sons, while they faithfully observed the rituals of his own appointment? Was not the plate of pure gold with the inscription, "Holiness to the Lord," a symbol of the purity of heart which God required of the people in all their acts of worship? Such a symbol of purity, so conspicuously placed on the forehead of the high-priest, was a constant admonition to the people, to beware of iniquity in their offerings; and by wearing this monitory symbol, it appears that Aaron bore the "iniquities of their holy things, that they might be accepted."

In the other case, it appears that by eating the meat of the sin-offering, the priests bore "the iniquity of the congregation." Were not these merciful institutions adapted to make favourable impressions on the minds, both of the priests and the people,—impressions of God's purity, benevolence, and forgiving love;—and of the importance of their reconciliation to a Being who constantly sought their spiritual improvement and happiness?

Secondly. The scape-goat also bore the iniquities of the Israelites: "Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live-goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities into a land not inhabited." Lev. xvi. 21, 22. In this institution, we have symbolical acts performed to denote God's readiness to forgive, or remove from his people, all their transgressions; on the most merciful terms,—their humbly confessing their sins. Putting

the hands on the head of the goat, and confessing over it the sins of the people, were affecting ceremonies, suited to lead the people to proper reflections on their own guilt, and the mercy of the Lord.

Thirdly. Ezekiel bore the iniquity of the house of Israel, and the house of Judah. As a "sign" unto them, he was directed to lie a certain number of days on his "left side," and to "lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it." "So," said the Lord to him, "shalt thou bear the iniquity of the house of Israel." He was then directed to lie on his "right side," and in like manner to "bear the iniquity of the house of Judah," Ezek. iv. 4—6.

These also were symbolical acts, by which, probably, Ezekiel was to admonish the Israelites and Jews of impending calamities. The manner in which he bore their iniquities might well be regarded by them as a call to repentance. But nothing is perceived of substituted sufferings; nothing which even symbolically represented one as bearing the punishment due to another's offences.

Fourthly. Jehovah himself bore the iniquities of his chosen people:

"Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them," Isa. i. 14.

"So that the Lord could no longer bear, because of the evil of your doings," Jer. xlv. 22.

"And about the time of forty years suffered he," or bore he, "their manners in the wilderness." Acts xiii. 18.

A learned English writer (John Taylor, of Norwich) has brought together twelve texts, which in the Hebrew language represent God as bearing, or having borne, the iniquities of his people; but which, in the common version of the Bible, are translated as if to bear meant to pardon.—Three of these will be exhibited.

In the prayer of Moses, Exodus xxxii. 32, we read in our version: "Yet now, if thou wilt, forgive their sin," that is, bear their sin.

"The Lord is long suffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity,"—bearing iniquity Numb. xiv. 18.

"Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth"—beareth—"iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage?" Micah vii. 18.

There are other forms of speech used in the Bible, which express or imply God's bearing the sins of mankind. Long-suffering, if I mistake not, means long-bearing or long-enduring ungrateful and disobedient conduct. The idea of God's bearing the iniquities of men, is strongly expressed, Amos ii. 13, "Behold, I am pressed under you, as a cart is pressed, that is full of sheaves."

As a benevolent father bears the ungrateful conduct of a child, so God bears the sins of mankind. In this case, it may be presumed that no one will pretend that bearing sin, means bearing punishment, or substituted suffering. Yet God's bearing our iniquities may be for the same purpose that Christ bore them, that is, to melt our hearts with his kindness, and reconcile us to himself. "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness, and forbearance, and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" Rom. ii. 4.

Fifthly. There are instances in which children are said to have borne the iniquities of rebellious or wicked fathers. The second commandment contains the following words: "For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." Two cases are particularly mentioned in the Old Testament, in which the children bore the iniquities of their fathers. While the Israelites were in the wilderness, God thus addressed the fathers of that generation: "But as for you, your carcasses, they shall fall in the wilderness. And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years and bear your whoredoms," Num. xiv. 32, 33.

After a war with the Babylonians, Jeremiah, in his Lamentations, says, "Our fathers have sinned; and are not; and we have borne their iniquities," Lam. v. 7.

In these cases the children bore the iniquities of their fathers, not as being punished for the sins of their fathers, but as suffering the evil consequences of their fathers' wickedness. As children are often brought into distressed and ruinous circumstances, by their ambition, avarice, revenge, or profligacy of their parents; so it was with the children spoken of in these passages. But they were not punished as guilty of their fathers' sins, nor were their sufferings a substitute for the punishment due to their fathers; for the fathers fell by the displeasure of God, though the children bore their iniquities. In one of the cases, the carcasses of the fathers fell in the wilderness for their rebellion against the Lord; in the other, the fathers fell in a war with Nebuchadnezzar, in which they engaged contrary to the advice and warnings of a prophet of the Lord,—in which war, their country was ruined, themselves destroyed, and their children carried into a long captivity.

Sixthly. There is another sense in which some have supposed that children bear the iniquities of their fathers, and which sense is mentioned in the Bible. In the days of Ezekiel, this proverb seems to have been current: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." By this, it seems, they meant that children were punished for the sins of their fathers. But God assured them that such was not the fact. On their part, the case was thus stated: "Why? doth not the son bear the iniquity of the father?" In reply, God positively declared, "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father; neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son," Ezek. xviii. 19, 20.

It is very evident, that the son's bearing the iniquity of the father is here used in a sense different from what it was by Jeremiah. For had the words been used in the same sense by both prophets, they would have directly contradicted each other. Thousands of children in every age bear the iniquities of their fathers in the sense in which the words are used by Jeremiah. But no child, it is believed, ever bore the sins of his father in the sense in which the words are used in Ezekiel. In other words, thousands suffer in consequence of the vile conduct of their fathers; but no one is punished for his father's transgressions.

Exclusive of the instances which relate to the Messiah, we have now before us a variety of cases in which one is said to bear the iniquities of another. Such language appears to have been used by the inspired writers in different senses on different occasions; but I have not been able to find a single instance in which the language is used in a sense analogous to that which has been given it when used in relation to Christ.

The one which approaches the nearest to that sense, is the one which God positively disclaims as having no place under his government. But even in this case, there are two points in which there is a want of analogy. For it can hardly be supposed, that the complainers in Ezekiel's time had any idea of substituted sufferings; or that their sufferings would exempt their fathers from punishment; and it is very certain that these complainers never consented to suffer the punishment due to the sins of their fathers.

The idea of substituted suffering is essential to the prevalent theory respecting the atonement; and also essential to the hypothesis, that the anger or avenging justice of God was displayed in the sufferings of Christ. But of all the instances which have been brought to view, I think there is not one in which can be discovered the least appearance of substituted suffering; and this circumstance is, in my mind, strong proof, that the nature of Christ's sufferings has been greatly misunderstood; and that the prevalent hypothesis respecting them is incorrect and unwarranted by the Bible.

Had I found, on careful inquiry, that the idea of substituted punishment, or penal suffering, is always implied in one's bearing the sins of another, as the words are used in the Scriptures in respect to others, what would have been thought of my candour and my integrity, if I should still insist that such is not the meaning of the words when used in rela-