

Suffering Accomplished and Applied? The Sympathy of the Great High Priest

One of the greatest gifts God has given his people is the sympathy of his Son. While seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high, the Mediator is not aloof to the sensibilities of the sheep. In the words of Henry Lyte, “Well our feeble frame he knows. In his hand he gently bears us, rescues us from all our foes.”¹ Christ’s sympathetic disposition is highlighted in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize (συμπαθῆσαι) with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15, ESV).

In seasons of affliction, the Church needs to be reminded that she has an advocate before the Father who is “meek and lowly in heart.”² The Son of Man is not cold to the sufferings of abuse, violent conflict, or global pandemic. Thomas Goodwin writes, “That the heart of Jesus Christ, now he is in heaven [*sic*], is as graciously inclined to sinners as ever it was on earth.”³ Even in glory, his sympathy abounds!

Sympathy Misunderstood

While such a reminder is important for the happiness of God’s people, it must not reason beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. Certain veins of theological literature draw conclusions from this “sympathy” which are less than biblical. The error we are concerned with at present has its roots in the interpretation of συμπαθῆσαι as “suffering” in the Epistle to the Hebrews. B.F. Westcott writes, “It expresses not simply the compassion of one who regards suffering from without, but the feeling of one who enters into the suffering and *makes it his own*. So Christ is touched with the feeling of our weaknesses.”⁴

¹ “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” by Henry Francis Lyte, 1834.

² Matt 11:29, KJV

³ Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), 53.

⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays*. (MacMillan, 1984), 107 (emphasis original); For a sample of commentators who hold an affective understanding of sympathy, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, 1st ed., The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 140; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1 - 8*, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and William L.

At present, we are concerned with the proper interpretation of συμπάθησαι, as well as the doctrinal implications of a Christ who perpetually suffers. When the doctrine of Christ's sympathy is confounded in this way, two conclusions closely follow. First, the author's intended admonition to the Church: perseverance amid temptation. Second, injury is done to the doctrine of the atonement by conflating the functions of the High Priestly office.

Preliminary Doctrine: The Nature of the High Priestly Office

The Westminster Larger Catechism recognizes two essential functions of the High Priestly office: "Christ executeth the office of a priest, [1] in his once *offering* himself a sacrifice without spot to God, to be a reconciliation for the sins of his people; and [2] in making continual *intercession* for them."⁵ Both of these have distinct roles within Christ's mediatorial office. To be sure, these functions do interact with one another in a way that shows continuity, as Berkhof writes, "It is evident that this work of Christ may not be dissociated from His atoning sacrifice, which forms its necessary basis. It is but the continuation of the priestly work of Christ, carrying it to completion."⁶ And yet, a categorical distinction remains as we properly assess Christ's sympathy as portrayed in the fourth chapter of Hebrews.

1. Offering

First, we see the finality of the High Priestly work. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "This office, the Lord Jesus did most willingly undertake; which that he might discharge, he was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfill it, endured most grievous torments immediately in his soul, and most painful sufferings in his body."⁷ Notice the past tense language

Lane, WBC 47.A (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2009), 114; Hughes leaves no doubt, "Jesus, our High Priest, has an unequalled capacity for sympathy. It goes far beyond the intellectual, because it is *truly experiential*. Jesus does not just imagine how we feel—he *feels it!* The word for 'sympathize' here means 'to share the experience of another'—to sympathize through common experience. The most sensitive man who ever lived *feels with us.*" R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul*, PTW (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 127–36 (emphasis mine).

⁵ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: As Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America: With Proof Texts*. (Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education & Publications Committee of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), 185 (emphasis mine); So also Turretin, "The priesthood of Christ is the function of the mediatorial office according to which he performs those things with God which must be performed for sinners; both by [1] offering himself up once as a victim for them and [2] by interceding for them always with the Father." Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 2:403.

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Woodstock, Ontario: W.B. Eerdmans, 2017), 401.

⁷ Chad B Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2016, 115–16.

in this description. Luke records the words of Christ himself, ““The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised”” (Luke 9:22, ESV). The concept of suffering was so endemic to the person of Christ that it was predicted in the Isaianic prophecy of the Messiah. Well known is the prophecy of the Suffering Servant:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed (Isa 53:4-6, ESV).

Culminating at the Cross

The duration of Christ’s sufferings must here be considered. Did Christ suffer *exclusively* at the time of his crucifixion? A cursory glance of Scripture reveals that Christ’s affliction went beyond Calvary.⁸ It is more fitting to understand his suffering as an escalation over his whole life, *culminating* with the death on the cross. Turretin explains:

Here we cannot approve of the hypothesis of those who wish to restrict all the satisfactory sufferings of Christ to those which he endured during the three hours of the obscuration of the sun while he was on the cross and before he expired. (...) For however indubitable it is that those were the greatest agonies to which he was exposed during the time of darkness (...), still it is no less evident that the others were expiatory also.⁹

Christ’s life of suffering cannot be relegated entirely to the last hours of his life.¹⁰ Indeed we must affirm that his work of obedience amid of his earthly suffering and temptation “were expiatory also.”¹¹ Christ’s perseverance in obedience from the start of his life to the finish, has been often overlooked in modern evangelical circles. Although formally acknowledged, it can appear tangential or secondary to Christ’s mission. Yet Christ’s obedience is properly understood

⁸ Such as the temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13), weeping for Lazarus (John 11:35), attempted murder (Luke 4:28-30), and weariness from travel (John 4:6).

⁹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 2:446. So also Witsius, “He therefore gives too great scope to his fancy, who restrains the things which are affirmed of the afflictions, griefs, and anguish of Christ in general, to the three hours’ sufferings.” Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1990), 1:214. Wilhelmus à Brakel also writes, “This suffering in its entirety atoned for the sins of the elect—not merely His suffering on the cross during the three hours of darkness.” Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Book, 2012), 1:585.

¹⁰ Edwards even speaks of Christ’s circumcision, “And so to instance in his circumcision, what he suffered in that had the nature of satisfaction, the blood that was shed in his circumcision was propitiatory blood.” Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards, In Eight Volumes*, 1st ed. (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, Jr., 1808), 2:193.

¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:446.

in the context of atonement as a holistic piece *culminating* at the cross, rather than an “add-on” to the atonement.

Thus it is relevant to the topic at hand: If the sufferings *prior* to the crucifixion had atonement relevance, then we must make every effort to safeguard from ascribing a suffering status to Christ *in the present*. The atonement is final and there is no need of more suffering for sins. Indeed, this is the very message of the author of Hebrews! “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Heb 10:14, ESV). It does not fit the author’s logic to conclude that our Savior is submitted to further pangs to spur us on in our sanctification! Indeed the finality of the atonement is at the very heart of the author’s message: past sacrifices were continuous and ineffective, but the Lamb of God’s is complete. This is precisely what gives the audience the hope to persevere amid temptation.

Thus, it is of paramount importance to affirm the *completion* of Christ's suffering. His intercession, on the other hand, is *ongoing*.

2. *Intercession*

The second function of Christ’s office of High Priest is his “continual intercession.” In his letter to the Church in Rome, Paul writes, “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died - more than that, who was raised - who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom 8:34, ESV). Thomas Aquinas explains the heavenly intercession as “the very showing of Himself in the human nature which He took with Him to heaven (...) pleading for us, so that for the very reason that God so exalted human nature in Christ, He may take pity on them for whom the Son of God took human nature.”¹²

It is right to speak in the present tense concerning the doctrine of intercession since we can be sure that Christ is presently interceding for his people. Again notice the logic of the author of Hebrews: “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”¹³

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Laurence Shapcote, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas (Green Bay, WI: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012). IIIa.57.6.

¹³ Heb 7:25, ESV (emphasis mine)

Undermines Atonement

The functions of the High Priest ought to be understood as both (1) offering and (2) intercession. *Both* of these functions are fulfilled in the Person of Christ. Yet, they must be kept in their proper setting. To confuse them loses the distinction between what has been fulfilled in the past and what continues into the future.¹⁴ Taken to its logical end, the doctrine of Christ's continuous suffering leads to a distorted view of the atonement: one that is never quite finished. This stands against the whole message of the Epistle to the Hebrews concerning the finality of Christ's offering:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (Heb 10:11-14, ESV).

Therefore, the intercession of Christ does not necessitate an *ongoing* suffering, but an *accomplished* one.

John Owen and the Doctrine of Sympathy

Perhaps the most well-known theologian to advocate for a sympathy of suffering is John Owen. In showing Christ's nearness to Christians amid their afflictions, he goes beyond what is warranted. He writes, "'We have,' says the apostle, 'such a high priest as can, and consequently does, suffer with us - endure our infirmities.'"¹⁵ Owen's context is that of "the frame of the heart of Christ" towards the tempted saints.¹⁶ It's not Owen's motives that are brought to question, as his aim in *Communion with the Triune God* is to aid the Christian's understanding of his relation to the persons of the Trinity. Yet we see a continuing thread in much of Owen's writings which lacks proper guard rails.

¹⁴ Yet the intercession did take place over Christ's earthly life before his resurrection or ascension. This is one way in which we affirm Berhof's statement (See John 11:41-42; 17:9-26, Luke 22:32; 23:34). So also the writer of Hebrews who says, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence...And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb 5:7,9; ESV). Christ's prayers on earth shouldn't be understood as a categorically separate type of intercession. Rather it is a type of "first-fruits" of the intercession that would be at the right hand of God, after he has completed his mission and been raised in glory. Wilhemus à Brakel writes, "Yes, if Christ, while upon earth, was always heard (John 11:41-42), much more will He, now being in heaven, receive everything at His request." à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:552.

¹⁵ Taken from one of his most well-known works: John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 256.

¹⁶ Owen, *Communion*, 256.

The Mystical Union with Christ

In his famous commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, Owen associates Christ's "fellow-feeling" the pains of the Christian to the doctrine of union with Christ:

Our infirmities and weaknesses under these things, to wrestle with them or remove them, and consequently our trouble, sorrow, suffering, and danger, by them and from them, our high priest is intimately affected withal. He takes himself to be concerned in our troubles, as we are *members of his mystical body*, one with him; he is inclined from his own heart and affections to give in unto us help and relief, as our condition doth require; and he is inwardly moved during our sufferings and trials with a sense of fellow-feeling of them.¹⁷

Without going into a detailed account of Owen's doctrine of union with Christ, we must yet consider the implications of this association. Owen's verbiage of "intimately affected" and "fellow-feeling" with respect to the doctrine of the mystical union seems to go beyond what is warranted in the text. Does the believer's Union with Christ necessitate a union in a "fellow-feeling" of our present sufferings?

In contrast, John Murray emphasizes the *finished* work of atonement: "Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its *once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ.*"¹⁸ For Owen to assume that our mystical union with Christ implies a status of perpetual suffering is inconsistent both with the doctrine of the atonement, and the purpose of the mystical union with Christ. In his well-known work *Communion with the Triune God*, Owen continues in this line of reasoning, "Whatever be our infirmities, so far as they are our temptations, he does suffer with us under them, and compassionates us."¹⁹

Owen accounts for this reciprocity by alluding to the relationship between wives and husbands in the fifth chapter of Ephesians. Paul writes, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32, ESV). Owen seems to conclude that the mysterious union mentioned by Paul involves a "give and take" relationship. He even refers to

¹⁷ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 20:421–22.

¹⁸ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2015), 171 (emphasis mine). Indeed Murray is deliberately succinct on the matter compared to Owen. He even acknowledges the pervasive nature of Union with Christ: "Union with Christ is in itself a very broad and embracive subject...it underlies every step of the application of redemption." At present the value is to note that he emphasizes union's finality of suffering while Owen emphasizes the doctrine's perpetual implications; a conclusion that seems to be at-best peripheral to Eph 5:32.

¹⁹ Owen, *Communion*, 257.

this union as “a mutual resignation of themselves one to the other; (...) mutual, consequential, conjugal affections.”²⁰

On the contrary, Paul refers to the surety of our oneness with Christ rather than a “mutual resignation” of parties. The purpose is not to point to a reciprocity of “fellow-feeling” but to display the surety of the believer’s share in Christ. Shedding light on the “mystery” and the “union” is Williamson, who writes, “Mystery refers to the once hidden plan of God that has now been revealed in Christ (...) What Gen 2:24 and marriage itself reveal to us about Christ and the Church is that the two become one, an indissoluble union of head and body, bridegroom and bride.”²¹ Additional conclusions from our mystical union with Christ that develop reciprocal interplay of passions (particularly suffering) are speculative.

Further, whatever sharing of suffering entailed in the mystical union, the contrary is more fitting: we share in *Christ’s* past sufferings. So Berkhof reasons when writing on the mystical union: “In virtue of this union believers have fellowship with Christ. Just as Christ shared the labours, the sufferings, and the temptations of His people, they are now made to share His experiences. They are crucified with Him, and also arise with Him in newness of life.”²² The believer’s mystical union with Christ is not a reason for a perpetually Suffering Servant. On the contrary, we take on the very sufferings of a life joined to Christ.²³ The servant is not greater than his master.²⁴

Human Nature

Owen also links the High Priestly suffering to human nature. In one portion, he writes:

But we are apt to think that his work being well over, we have now no more concernment *in that nature nor advantage by it*, but that what yet remains to be done for us may be as well discharged by him who is only God, and absolutely so in every respect...Yet doth not all this in the least impeach our assertion of the greatness of our concernment in the continuation of his human nature in the union of his person...But I shall mention that

²⁰ Owen, *Communion*, 155.

²¹ Peter S. Williamson and Mary Healy, *Ephesians*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2009), 172–73.

²² Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 453.

²³ “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12, ESV). “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24, ESV).

²⁴ John 15:20

alone which is here proposed by our apostle, namely, his ability from thence to be affected with a sense of our infirmities and sufferings.²⁵

Does Owen see human nature and suffering as inherently intertwined? This again goes against the finality of the atonement. Christ's human nature continues into glory, but that doesn't mean suffering does as well. Humanity does not necessitate suffering, yet it seems that Owen goes here to help show Christ's "fellow-feeling"²⁶ with sufferers. If human nature and suffering were inseparable, then Christ would continue to suffer at the right hand of God, which, as has already been demonstrated, cannot be the case.²⁷

To his credit, Owen is quite clear on the finality of the atonement elsewhere. In fact, very few have written as clearly as him on the subject! This is one of the main points in his work *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.²⁸ The present purpose, however, is to flag the inconsistency between his own systematic conclusions and his exegesis of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Συμπαθήσαι

Finally, Owen writes on the meaning of συμπαθήσαι in his commentary. He translates it based on its only other occurrence in the epistle: "The word is once more used by our apostle in this epistle and nowhere else in the New Testament, chap. X. 34, τοῖς δεσμίοις μὴ συνεπαθήσατε, where we render it by 'having compassion.' (...) though I should rather say, 'Ye

²⁵ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 20:422–23 (emphasis mine).

²⁶ Owen, *Works*, 20:422.

²⁷ Behind this lurks the question of whether or not the Incarnation was part of Christ's humiliation. Nuance is needed. It is right to say that the Incarnation was humiliation insofar as the Son "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped...being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:6-7, ESV). Yet the Incarnation was the foundation for both Christ's humiliation and exaltation. Berkhof writes, "There was some difference of opinion on this point even among Reformed theologians. It would seem that this question should be answered with discrimination. It may be said that the incarnation, altogether in the abstract, the mere fact that God in Christ assumed a human nature, though an act of condescension, was not in itself a humiliation...But it certainly was a humiliation that the Logos assumed "flesh," that is, human nature as it is since the fall, weakened and subject to suffering and death, though free from the taint of sin. This would seem to be implied in such passages as Rom. 8:3; II Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:6,7." Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 336. Without the Incarnation there could be no resurrection. Therefore it should be qualified as serving a function for both categories. In his catechism Owen writes, "*Wherein consisteth the state of Christ's humiliation?* A. In three things; first, in his incarnation, or being born of a woman." John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 1:484. Though Owen properly categorizes, perhaps some discrimination would help frame Owen's Hebrews writings and distance himself from a view of Christ's humanity and perpetual suffering.

²⁸ He writes, "By the end of the death of Christ, we mean (...) that which was effectually fulfilled and accomplished by it." John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 45.

suffered with me in my bonds.”²⁹ Because the occurrence of συμπαθέω in the tenth chapter leads to a sharing in the suffering of those in prison, Owen draws this conclusion.

However, he makes a critical error by conflating the sympathy (compassion on those in prison) with its subsequent effect (accepting the plundering of property). Guthrie explains, “The word ‘sympathize’ does not necessitate a sharing of another’s exact experience, but, as in 10:34 - where the hearers are said to have sympathized with the prisoners (though not being prisoners themselves) - the word connotes being ‘compassionate to the point of helping.’”³⁰ Though it is true that the church subsequently suffered with the prisoners, there is not sufficient reason to conclude that the sympathy itself *was* the suffering. Yet Owen brings this conclusion to bear on the meaning of συμπαθήσαι back to chapter four.³¹ Owen thus interprets Christ’s *sympathy* to be *suffering*.

Devotional Literature

The finality of the atonement is essential for the vitality of the Church. Yet some devotional writers seem to have unknowingly fallen to misinterpretation. In an attempt to show readers the compassion that Christ has for his people, some have depicted Christ as being so near to Christians in their suffering, that he is suffering *with* them *in the present*. One such example is Thomas Goodwin’s *The Heart of Christ*, which focuses on the text of Heb 4:15 and the implications of a sympathizing Savior.

Goodwin helpfully shows the reader that even though Christ is exalted in heaven, his heart towards his sheep is still as tender as ever. However, concerning Christ’s sympathy (συμπαθήσαι), it would seem that Goodwin goes beyond mere tenderness:

²⁹ Owen points out that the noun form is used in 1 Pet 3:8 (συμπαθείς). Yet he concludes that *compassion* or *pity* fails to capture the fullness of the meaning. The ESV translates 1 Pet 3:8 as, “have unity of mind, *sympathy*, brotherly love” (ESV). Following Beza, Owen translates, “affected with a mutual sense of the troubles of each other.” Owen, *Works*, 20:419–20.

³⁰ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 176. So also Ellingworth, “The strong sense of sharing suffering...is not required by the context. The meaning here, as in 2:16-18 and 5:2, is more probably that Christ’s earthly life gives him inner understanding of human experience, and thus makes him ready and able to give active help.” Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGCNT (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1993), 268. So also Lünemann who sees no need to go beyond “*to have sympathy*, compassionate feeling.” Gottlieb Lünemann, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to The Epistles to Timothy and Titus and to The Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. Maurice J. Evans, vol. 9 of *Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1885), 493.

³¹ So *TDNT*, “denotes disposition rather than act, i.e., fellow-feeling with the ἀσθενεῖα.” Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, eds., *TDNT* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985), 5:935–36.

Yet he retains [in Heaven] one tender part and bare place in his heart still unarmed, as it were, even to suffer with you, and to be touched if you be. The word is a deep one, συμπαθῆσαι. He *suffers with you* [sic], he is as tender in his affections to you as ever he was; that he might be moved to pity you, he is willing to suffer, as it were, one place to be left naked, and to be flesh still, on which he may be wounded with your miseries, that so he might be your merciful high priest.³²

Following Goodwin is a recent work by Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*. Ortlund's intent is to bring Goodwin's elucidations to a modern audience. He emphasizes Christ's tender heart towards his people, even in his glorified state. Although there is much to commend in *Gentle and Lowly*, Ortlund imports Goodwin's error. He even goes so far as to say that Christ presently "co-suffers with us."³³

While biblical orthodoxy manifestly affirms Christ's compassion for his people, such devotional literature must be tempered with precision. Indeed, Christ's sympathy is a source of adoration! The eye of faith is enabled to "Behold his hands and side, rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified."³⁴ The wounds are inscribed, but not perpetually inflicted. We should never forget Christ's sufferings, as they are present in his glorified body.³⁵ Yet there is a proper order that must be followed: suffering *precedes* session. "Crown him with many crowns" indeed; just not with the one made of thorns. That one has been finished,³⁶ and replaced.³⁷

Context of Perseverance

What then is the purpose of Christ's sympathy according to the author of Hebrews? To help believers persevere in the midst of temptation. He writes, "For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb 2:18, ESV). Our Savior's suffering in the midst of temptation has led the way. Heavenly sympathy does not serve the purpose of mere earthly empathy. Our solidarity with Christ is the grounds on which we can persevere in the trials that come.

³² Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ*, 52.

³³ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 49..

³⁴ "Crown Him with Many Crowns" by Matthew Bridges, 1851.

³⁵ See John 20:25-28

³⁶ "When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, 'It is finished,' and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:30, ESV).

³⁷ "Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand" (Rev 14:14, ESV).

In a culture where empathy has become the queen virtue, we must guard from reading Scripture through a therapeutic lense. While Christians ought to be comforted by the solidarity shared with Christ, the ends of that solidarity must be close-by: to give us hope in the midst of temptation. What hope indeed! F.F. Bruce writes, “What a source of strength it was to them to be assured that in the presence of God they had as their champion and intercessor one who had known similar and even sorer temptations, and had withstood them victoriously!”³⁸ Without the sympathy of the great High Priest, we would not have the intercessor we need.

Conclusion

Since Christ’s sympathy has the primary impetus for our perseverance amidst temptation, we find great comfort in it. It is important to understand the doctrine with precision lest we do injustice to the finality of the atonement, the functions of the Great High Priest, and to the author’s context of perseverance in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

It is true that Christ’s heart is “gentle and lowly” towards his people. And yet, our theological perspective regarding Christ’s present state ought to be in line with the eschatological reality that the next time he comes, the world will be hiding from the wrath of the Lamb.³⁹ At the Incarnation, equality with God was not a thing to be grasped.⁴⁰ Yet there will be no mistaking his power in his return. For, “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19:16, ESV). Thus the Church has a seemingly paradoxical task: We must be comforted by the tenderness of the Shepherd’s heart, yet also heed the charge to stay awake⁴¹ and hasten the return of the King.⁴²

Christ’s sympathy serves a mediatorial end. Intercession is not a secondary benefit, with empathy being primary.⁴³ Sympathy pleads our case with the Father. The only way Christians can

³⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament 14 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1981), 53.

³⁹ Rev 6:15-17

⁴⁰ Phil 2:6, Luke 2:7

⁴¹ Mark 13:32-37

⁴² 2 Pet 3:11-13

⁴³ This solidarity is precisely the type of comfort that the church is told to grant to one another: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15, ESV). Paul even sets Christ as the paradigm to follow in this regard. In the letter to the Philippians, he encourages the church to imitate Christ, the greatest servant. Yet present imitations are the past sufferings of Christ who now has received God’s highest honor, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father” (Phil 2:10-11, ESV).

“hold fast the confession of hope without wavering” (Heb 10:23, ESV) is with the sympathetic Great High Priest on the throne.

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