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Taking Care of the Body of Jesus: Towards a Biblical Theology of Suffering

Arthur A. Just Jr.

On coming into the world, Christ says, “A sacrifice and an offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me. With burnt offerings and a sin offering you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘See I have come—in the scroll of the book it is written of me—to do your will, O God’” (Heb 10:5–7).¹ “A body you have prepared for me”—a body prepared in the womb of the Virgin Mary at the incarnation of the Son of God, the human body of Jesus, a suffering body to be sacrificed for the expiation of sins, a body prepared to do the will of the Father, a body that is the source of our holiness. “By that will we are made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10). With his body, Jesus, prepared to do the Father’s will, suffered on the cross, so that through his body he could do what all the sacrifices on the altars of the tabernacle and temple could not do—make us holy by completely removing sin.

Within a world where suffering and pain have no meaning, only the passion narrative of Christ’s suffering and our participation in his sufferings give meaning to suffering. In his book *The Palliative Society*, Byung-Chul Han narrates how our world “does not permit pain to be enlivened into a *passion*, to be given a language.”² He goes on to say, “The human being has lost a narrative protection, and thus also the ability to alleviate pain symbolically. Without this protection, we are at the mercy of a naked body deprived of meaning and language.”³

Yet Byung-Chul Han, though a secular philosopher, believes that the passion narrative of Christ’s suffering gives pain a narrative and therefore gives meaning to suffering. For support, he appeals to the Spanish mystic Teresa of Ávila. “For her,” he writes, “pain is highly articulate. It is with pain that narration begins. The Christian narrative gives pain a language. It transforms her body into a stage.”⁴ The suffering body of Teresa of Ávila tells the story of Jesus’ suffering from the passion narratives of the Gospels.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

² Byung-Chul Han, *The Palliative Society: Pain Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 3.

³ Han, *The Palliative Society*, 20.

⁴ Han, *The Palliative Society*, 20–21.

Han critiques the church for not embracing its own narrative of suffering during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. He accuses the church of succumbing to the palliative society by becoming a “society of survival.” He writes:

Because of the pandemic, the society of survival has prohibited church services, even at Easter. Priests, too, practice “social distancing” and wear protective masks. They sacrifice faith entirely for survival. . . . Virology deprives theology of its power. Everyone is listening to the virologists, who have acquired absolute authority in interpreting the situation. The narrative of the resurrection has completely given way to the ideology of health and survival. Faced with the virus, faith degenerates into farce.⁵

Perhaps what the pandemic has taught us is that as Christians we bear witness to the Christ who is in us through our suffering bodies, which tell the story of Christ’s suffering.⁶ In Baptism, our suffering, broken, sinful bodies are joined to Christ’s suffering, dying, and risen body, and in this communion with his flesh, we share in his suffering, death, and resurrection. Therefore, as Paul says in Romans 6, *our suffering, baptized bodies now tell the story of Jesus’ suffering*. During the recent pandemic, when members of our congregations experienced tremendous suffering, were they able to understand that their virus-ridden bodies tell the story of Christ’s suffering? And by taking care of Christ’s body, the church, have we who serve the church affirmed the great mystery of Christ’s communion with the church *in suffering*?

This paper will narrate how our bodies tell the story of Christ’s suffering by first showing how the body of Jesus, prepared for sacrifice to do God’s will, was cared for by women and his disciples, mistreated by his enemies, killed on a cross, raised from the dead with all its wounds, and then ascended to the right hand of the Father. The passion and resurrection narratives of the Gospels tell the story of Jesus as the suffering, righteous one who is vindicated by the Father in his resurrection. Then I will address how this body of Jesus is also the source of a biblical theology of suffering through the apostle Paul in his homily to the Galatians, where he explicitly shows how his persecuted body tells the story of Christ’s suffering as it is cared for by his pagan converts in Galatia. The Gospels and Paul provide a foundation for how the story of Christ’s suffering continues today through his body, the church. Taking care of the suffering body of Jesus brings people into communion with his body, the church. This is the foundation that leads toward a biblical theology of suffering and the heart of pastoral and diaconal care.

⁵ Han, *The Palliative Society*, 14–15.

⁶ Cf. Christopher West, *Our Bodies Tell God’s Story* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020), 4–5.

Taking Care of the Resurrected Body of Jesus

When Cleopas, the Emmaus disciple, asks Jesus, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem that has no idea of what is happening?” (Luke 24:18), he knew not the full extent of his question. Cleopas is thinking that Jesus is a pilgrim to the Passover who somehow missed the news of Jesus’ crucifixion. But the word he uses for Jesus, “stranger,” could also be translated as “resident alien,” which, in fact, is true. As the Son of the Most High (Luke 1:32) without a human father, Jesus truly is a sojourner on earth, not a native son at home on earth or even in Jerusalem. Ironically, Cleopas’s question of him is, in some ways, a confession of his true identity as the incarnate Son of the Father who came from a far country to secure for himself a kingdom (cf. Luke 19:12), to bring Israel out from bondage, and to lead her to her true and permanent home. As Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus is both a stranger in the hostile, fallen world and the Redeemer of the world (cf. Luke 24:21).

Crucial for Luke’s Gospel is the manner in which Jesus receives sinners in the world and the way in which sinners receive him and take care of his body. But with this stranger walking alongside them, from whom their eyes were hidden, the Emmaus disciples “were challenged to show hospitality to a God turned stranger (Luke 24:16).”⁷ Taking care of the resurrected body of Jesus now became the ultimate sign of Jewish hospitality to aliens and strangers, a fundamental principle of faithful Israel from the Torah.⁸

So how do the Emmaus disciples receive him? By inviting him into their home for table fellowship and the first post-resurrection Eucharist,⁹ a table they have prepared for his resurrected body. They prevail upon him to abide with them at this table, for they wanted the conversation on the road to continue—it did, after all, give them burning hearts—but perhaps even more they wanted to take care of this stranger and feed his body. Yet this stranger gets even stranger when they finally recognize him as the crucified and risen Christ, and then he vanishes from their sight in the breaking of the bread. Little did they realize that their burning hearts from his teaching on the road compelled them to eat the body and drink the blood of Christ, whose suffering invites us into a life of suffering for our neighbor. Their

⁷ Demetrius Dumm, “Luke 24:44–49 and Hospitality,” in *Sin, Salvation, and the Spirit*, ed. Daniel Durken (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), 234.

⁸ Dumm, “Luke 24:44–49 and Hospitality,” 233.

⁹ For the argument that the Emmaus meal connects the Last Supper with the Lord’s Supper in the post-Easter church, see Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 981–988, 1006–1014; see also R. Kolb and T. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 246 (Ap XXII 7): “They cite the passages in which bread is mentioned, as in Luke 24[35], where it is written that the disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. . . . [W]e do not seriously object if some of these passages are understood as referring to the sacrament.”

taking care of the resurrected body of Jesus, their hospitality, led to the first communion with the resurrected body of Jesus in the Eucharist.

But the strangeness continues. After the Emmaus disciples reported to the eleven how Jesus spoke to them on the way and was known to them in the breaking of the bread, Jesus stood in the midst of them and said, “Peace to you,” showing them his hands and feet with their wounds. He then said to them, “I AM myself; touch me and see, because a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see me having” (Luke 24:39). No wonder the disciples “disbelieved for joy” (Luke 24:41), that deliciously ambiguous saying that suggests “this is too good to be true.” Then, as if sensing they needed more proof, Jesus asks what appears to be a totally random question—“Do you have anything to eat here?” So the eleven disciples take care of the resurrected body of Jesus by giving him a piece of roasted fish, and Jesus took it and ate it before them.

Think about those eleven disciples in that moment, what they might have felt about “the strangeness of the risen body of Jesus. The disciples were looking at the first, and so far the only, piece of incorruptible physicality.”¹⁰ And Jesus shows them how to take care of his resurrected body with all its wounds to prepare them to take care of his body, the church, in the post-resurrection world. Luke 24 teaches us that Jesus is a resident alien for whom faithful Israelites need to show hospitality. When we speak about caring for the body of Jesus, we begin with the confused and shocked disciples inadvertently taking care of Christ with his strange, incorruptible, resurrected flesh. From that first eighth day, the question is this: How will the world receive him, and then take care of his body, the church?

To recover a theology of the body, we need to affirm of first importance that in the Parousia the resurrection of our bodies will be like Jesus’ glorious body. For a theology of the body must embrace a body that suffers and one day, like Jesus, will rise in a transformed body that will reflect the image of God he first created in paradise.

Taking Care of the Living and Dying Body of Jesus

During my days as director of deaconess studies, I reflected with our students on how remarkable it was that women took care of the body of Jesus. In reading the Gospels, I encouraged them to follow the body of Jesus and observe what happens to it. See how the infant body of Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger by his mother, Mary. Observe his body traveling throughout Galilee, touching lepers and coffins, using his spittle to heal, allowing a sinful woman to cause a

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 160.

scandal in the home of a Pharisee by washing his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, kissing them with her lips, and anointing them with expensive oil. Years later, six days before the Passover of his death, another woman in Bethany pours oil over his head and anoints his body in preparation for burial (Mark 14:3–9). Even now, we remember her. Watch then what happens to the body of Jesus during the week we now call holy—how it is beaten, scourged, pierced with nails, a spear thrust in his side, and then at the ninth hour how he gives up his Spirit and dies. Listen to Joseph of Arimathea, a Pharisee, ask Pilate for the body of Jesus, and then take it down quickly from the cross, anoint it with spices, wrap it with linen cloths, and lay it in a tomb. View the women who followed Jesus from Galilee go to the tomb to observe how his body was laid so that, after the Sabbath, they could bring spices and myrrh to complete the anointing of his body. Witness their shock and fear when they come to the tomb and find it empty. And then watch Peter running to the tomb, looking in and seeing only the linen cloth bands. The tomb was empty. Jesus had been raised from the dead.

In Luke's Gospel, cloth bands wrapping the body of Jesus are a sign of the incarnation (his infant body wrapped in swaddling clothes—Luke 2:12), a sign of the atonement (his dead body wrapped in linen cloths—Luke 23:53), and a sign of the resurrection (Peter seeing the linen cloths by themselves—Luke 24:12).

The disciples and women take care of the body of Jesus because that is what comes naturally to people who love their neighbor and their friend. The most concrete and intimate expression of love is to take care of the body of someone broken in sickness or death. That is what Jesus did throughout his ministry. People came to Jesus by the thousands to touch his body and he, in turn, used his touch to heal them. People fed his body and he fed theirs, especially in that miraculous feeding of the five thousand by the Sea of Galilee where God showed hospitality to sinners. Except for his circumcision and the shedding of his blood at eight days old and his temptations in the wilderness by Satan, the Gospels are relatively silent about the physical suffering of Jesus before his passion. Perhaps when the people of Nazareth dragged him outside the city to throw him off the hill he suffered from being buffeted about by their anger and passionate desire to kill him.

Quite possibly, Jesus' most acute suffering before his passion came from seeing the results of sin as countless people came to him who were possessed by demons, stricken by disease, overcome by sin, and grieving over death. Luke's programmatic Nazareth sermon shows that Jesus came to release from bondage those who are captive and broken by demons, sickness, sin, and death. In the catalogue of miracles that follow that sermon—casting out the demon in the Capernaum synagogue and healing Peter's mother-in-law—Luke concludes the account by saying:

When the sun was setting, all those who had ones suffering sickness with various diseases brought them to him. And laying his hands on each one of them, he healed them. And demons also went out of many, crying and saying, "You are the Son of God." And rebuking them, he did not allow them to speak, because they knew him to be the Christ. (Luke 4:40–41)

In my translation, I added "suffering" because that is what people experience when they have diseases and are possessed by demons. Their whole being, body and soul, suffers. Jesus has compassion on them and heals them by laying on his hands. His holy body touches their unclean bodies. Cyril of Alexandria reminds us how powerful the touch of the body or flesh of Jesus is on humanity's suffering flesh:

Jesus laid His hands upon the sick one by one, and freed them from their malady. He demonstrated that the holy flesh, which He had made His own, and endowed with godlike power, possessed the active presence of the might of the Word. He intended us to learn that, although the Only-begotten Word of God became like us, yet He is none the less God. He wants us to know that He is easily able, even by His own flesh, to accomplish all things. His body was the instrument by which He performed miracles. . . . But observe again, I ask, how great is the usefulness of the touch of His holy flesh. For it both drives away diseases of various kinds, and a crowd of demons, and overthrows the power of the devil. It heals a very great multitude of people in one moment of time.¹¹

Luke reports when the day came, Jesus departed Capernaum and journeyed into a desert place (Luke 4:42). From his other retreats into the wilderness, we know that Jesus did so in order to pray (see Mark 1:35 and Luke 5:16). Could Jesus also be fleeing the crowds into the wilderness because he was overcome by their suffering? Could this be what he was praying about in the desert, that the cup of suffering was too much to bear? For where do the sicknesses and the suffering of the people go? Do they simply vaporize into thin air? Do the sicknesses and suffering have an object? Could it be Jesus' body? Jesus suggests as much when he says on more than one occasion that "the power has gone out from me to heal" (Luke 5:17; 6:19; 8:46). Could there be a great exchange in Jesus' healings; namely, that as the power goes out of him to heal those suffering with diseases, their suffering now flows into Jesus as he absorbs *in his body* the sickness of people who could, like the woman with the flow of blood, be healed by simply touching the tassel of his garment? Could this be what Matthew means when, after Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and many others possessed by demons and sicknesses, he writes: "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'" (Matt 8:17;

¹¹ Cyril of Alexandria, in Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 86.

see Isa 53:4)? While the Gospels never tell us that Christ had illnesses, nor that specific diseases and physical maladies were transferred to his body, the prophecy of Isaiah reveals the mystery that he bore all our sufferings, including those arising from diseases.

Jesus is the sin-bearer from the moment of his conception, proclaiming this publicly at his baptism, where he stands in the waters of the Jordan in substitution for us and in solidarity with us. His sin-bearing reaches its goal at the cross, where his body prepared for sacrifice bears our sins once for all.

Perhaps Jesus retreats to the desert because his body was so overcome by taking on the sufferings of our infirmities and diseases that he was tired and needed to rest quietly in prayer with his Father. Perhaps he was struggling with the reality of bearing in his body all this brokenness and needed to take care of his body—something the crowds, even the disciples, could not fathom. Perhaps he also knew it was not time to reveal the full extent of the good news that he was bringing, what those whose bodies were released from demon possession confess about him, that “You are the Son of God.” They know him to be the Christ, which leads Jesus to rebuke them in the same way he rebuked the man with the spirit of an unclean demon and the fever of Peter’s mother-in-law. He rebukes them because it was not their place to announce that he was the Christ, even though the people of Nazareth wanted to kill him for saying of the prophecy from Isaiah, “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:21). His time has not yet come. His final suffering on the cross is still a few years away. But even now, his suffering is so great he has to get away from it. His body was broken by bearing all that suffering. How could the crowds understand what is happening to his body as they search for him and find him? Yet, curiously, when they do find him he does not heal them. Instead he says, “Also to other cities it is necessary that I proclaim as Good News the kingdom of God, because for this purpose I was sent.” And Luke reports that he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea (Luke 4:42–44).

“A body you have prepared for me” (Heb 10:5). The body of the Creator came to his creation to send out from his body by his word and his touch the power to heal, and then to bear in his body our infirmities and diseases and sins. This is the good news of the kingdom that culminates in the narrative of his suffering in Jerusalem. The passion narratives in the Gospels tell the story of how the suffering of all the righteous saints of the Old Testament now reaches its goal in Jesus’ suffering, righteous flesh. He is the final consummation of the pattern of suffering set by Moses, the prophets, and the psalmists. This consummation demands that God’s innocent and righteous Messiah suffer an agonizing death and be raised on the third day. In the words of Martin Hengel: “The suffering ‘of the righteous’ is to be integrated completely and utterly into the suffering of the Messiah. *The Messiah alone*

is the righteous and sinless one par excellence. His suffering therefore has irreplaceable and unique significance.”¹²

In his final words to his disciples, Jesus says that his suffering and resurrection is the fulfillment of what was written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms. Why the Psalms? The last word of Jesus from the cross is from Psalm 31:5: “Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit” (Luke 23:46). This final word from the cross is characterized by a serene tone of confident trust in God as the one who redeems, rescues, and delivers those who suffer. In citing Psalm 31, Jesus expresses the message of all the psalms that God will give meaning to the suffering of his righteous saints because the entire pattern of Jesus’ life, suffering, and rejection to the point of death completes the suffering of the prophets. Committing his spirit to the Father is the climactic moment of the passion narrative of suffering. Jesus—the suffering, righteous one—suffered in his body to give meaning to the suffering of God’s innocent, righteous saints and to point to the resurrection of his body and the resurrection of their bodies.¹³ Jesus’ suffering “vindicate[s] . . . the Old Testament teaching that God is always and in every action utterly just and righteous. . . . The Resurrection of Jesus *had* to happen, if the teaching of the Old Testament about God is true.”¹⁴ The resurrection of Jesus’ body gives meaning to our suffering and points toward the hope of the resurrection of our bodies.

How Paul’s Suffering Body in Galatia Preaches the Gospel

Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus and his commission to be an apostle to the Gentiles was the defining moment of his life. But it was Ananias who heard what the Lord had in store for Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel; for I will show him *how much he must suffer for the sake of my name*” (Acts 9:15–16, emphasis added).

That Paul suffered for the sake of the gospel there can be no doubt. His catalogue of sufferings in 2 Corinthians indicates how much he was persecuted for being an apostle to the Gentiles:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from

¹² Martin Hengel, *The Atonement* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 41.

¹³ See Darrell Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 148; Just, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 946–947.

¹⁴ J. McHugh, “A Sermon for Easter Sunday,” *Clergy Review* 71 (March 1986): 92.

Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor 11:24–28)¹⁵

During his first missionary journey to southeast Asia Minor, known to us as southern Galatia, Paul healed a crippled man in Lystra (Acts 14:8–10), continuing the healing ministry of Jesus. As a result of this healing, he and Barnabas had to fight off attempts by the pagan crowds to elevate them to the status of the gods Zeus and Hermes, as people wanted to offer sacrifice to them (Acts 14:11–18). Perhaps they did not yet fully understand the preaching of Paul in Antioch of Pisidia about Jesus' suffering and death. In this way, they were like "those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize [Jesus] nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him" (Acts 13:27). So in Lystra, after the people attempt to make Paul and Barnabas gods, Paul announced to them the good news that they "should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them" (Acts 14:15).

Paul's preaching in southern Galatia, where he announced Jesus' death, resurrection, and the forgiveness of sins, did not go down well with the Jews from Antioch Pisidia and Iconium, two places he and Barnabas had just visited before coming to Lystra. Paul now told them at Lystra that he and Barnabas had been appointed to bring this good news to Gentiles: "For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have [set you to be a light to] the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the [uttermost parts] of the earth'" (Acts 13:47). These Jews from Antioch Pisidia and Iconium were so incensed by Paul's preaching that they persuaded the people from Lystra to stone Paul and drag him outside the city, leaving him for dead on the side of the road. These folks from Lystra are the same ones who moments before had to be restrained from offering sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas as the gods Zeus and Hermes. But in typical Lukan understatement, he reports that when Paul's disciples "gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city" of Lystra that had just stoned him, and then Paul went on to Derbe, Iconium, and Antioch Pisidia (Acts 14:20–21). His miraculous restoration from his stoning gives him the courage to go back to these cities that tried to kill him, for the purpose, in Luke's words, of "strengthening the souls of the disciples, [exhorting] them to continue in the faith, and saying that *through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22, emphasis added).

¹⁵ Scripture quotations in the following sections are from the ESV.

What in the world would have compelled Paul and Barnabas to return to the scene of the crime to preach a gospel that almost killed Paul? Perhaps the answer to this question can be found in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Assuming an early dating, Galatians would be Paul's first letter. These enigmatic words in Galatians 4, filled with personal pathos, may be a clue to understanding what happened to him during his first missionary journey when he, for the first time, fulfills what the Lord said to Ananias about Paul's suffering for the sake of Jesus' name:

Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. (Gal 4:12–15)

Although there is some debate about the nature of Paul's "bodily ailment," whether it was some physical illness or his "thorn in the flesh" (see 2 Cor 12:7), the Greek word means "weakness of the flesh" (*ἀσθένειαν τῆς σαρκός*, Gal 4:13), suggesting that his body suffered something physical. Could it be that Paul is referring to the persecution he received at the hands of the Jews after his time in Lystra, those many tribulations Luke refers to as a means of entering the kingdom of God? And could this physical ailment be a reference to the scars of Jesus Paul refers to in the second-to-last verse of Galatians (Gal 6:17)—his stigmata?¹⁶

Paul's body, beaten to a pulp, left half-dead alongside the road outside the city, would have been putrid, and like many beatings, his eyes would be swollen or completely shut. Maybe this is why Paul says to the Galatians, "you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me," because his eyes were affected by the stoning. That Paul had an eye condition could also account for his words at the end of Galatians, where he says, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand" (Gal 6:11). If the Galatians thought Paul was dead, it suggests that his condition was so bad that it would have scandalized people, even these Galatian mercenaries (many of these pagan converts likely were soldiers).¹⁷ His beaten body would be a "temptation" (*πειρασμόν*, Gal 4:14) to the Galatians because his condition

¹⁶ See Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 293; N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 123–124.

¹⁷ On the Galatians as Celts and mercenaries, see A. Andrew Das, *Galatians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 20; F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 4–5; Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches of Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 2–3; R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), lxii–lxiii.

was a result of his persecution for preaching the gospel. In most translations, it says that the Galatians “did not scorn or despise” Paul (Gal 4:14), but a more literal rendering would be “despise or spit out” (ἐξεπτύσατε), suggesting that under normal conditions Paul’s body would be such that the Galatians were “hoping to cleanse their mouths of the unclean odors they inhaled in his presence.”¹⁸ But instead, what happened? Paul writes that the Galatians “received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus” (Gal 4:14).

What further puzzles is Paul’s enigmatic statement that “You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first” (Gal 4:13). Perhaps Paul is saying that his brutally beaten body preaches the gospel to them. Paul returned to the city of his bodily persecution because now he had something to show them as well as tell them. His body showed them that he was no Zeus. “Look at my body,” he tells them. “It tells the story of the gospel, the story of Christ’s sufferings. For the same hostile powers that attacked me are the ones that caused Jesus to suffer during his passion; the same powers that caused the darkness—that killed Jesus—those same powers attacked my body and left me for dead. But I arose to return to you to preach the gospel *through my body*—look at me and be as I am. Be prepared to suffer many tribulations.” And as he says in the penultimate verse of Galatians: “From now on let no one cause me trouble, *for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus*” (Gal 6:17). These marks are Paul’s “stigmata” (τὰ στίγματα). They are Jesus-scars. Paul’s suffering body was God’s ἄγγελος, his messenger of the gospel, because in his stigmata the people saw Christ Jesus, receiving Paul in his brokenness in the same way they will receive Jesus in body broken, blood poured out, because now they understand the meaning of Jesus’ suffering through the suffering body of this beloved apostle. “Be prepared to imitate me in my sufferings as I imitate Christ” (see 1 Cor 11:1), Paul is telling them, “and this will give meaning to your own suffering.”

Paul begins these middle chapters of Galatians by chastising them for not understanding his preaching, as Jesus chastised the Emmaus disciples for not believing the Old Testament: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that *Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified*” (Gal 3:1, emphasis added). Paul chastised these Galatians, the ones who received him on the road out of Lystra as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus—the ones who would have gouged out their eyes for him. As he writes these words, Paul does not know if these precious pagan converts would now receive him as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. They had been bewitched by the false gospel of Paul’s Jewish Christian opponents.

¹⁸ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 421.

By undergoing circumcision, they were trading the scars of Paul's body for the scars of circumcised flesh. Paul publicly portrayed Jesus as crucified before their eyes, graphically preaching about the suffering of Jesus during his passion. But they did not understand it, for they quickly deserted him for another gospel (Gal 1:6). Did they not understand that the true meaning of the gospel is the suffering of Jesus? Did they not see how Paul's suffering body told the story of Jesus' suffering? Did he not tell them in that lyrical statement in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"? Paul's final words to the Galatians proclaim to them his whole identity in Christ crucified: "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).

On the road outside Lystra, Paul's eyes were opened to the reality that only through tribulations will we enter the kingdom of God, just as his eyes were opened by Ananias after being blinded by the light on the road to Damascus as the Lord said to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). Paul now understood that his body was the place where the sufferings of Christ could be seen. But now Paul is not the persecutor but the persecuted. Jesus is being persecuted in his body! Is this not what Paul means later on in Colossians where he says, "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)? Paul is not saying that the atonement is incomplete. On the contrary, he is saying that not only is the atonement complete (or in the words of Hebrews, "once-for-all"), but Christ's sufferings are ongoing in the suffering bodies of the saints who, through their sufferings, proclaim the gospel and therefore give meaning to their suffering. It was only when Paul received his first stigmata on the road outside Lystra that he began to understand the meaning of Ananias's words, how he would suffer for the name of Jesus, and how "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).¹⁹

J. Louis Martyn in his commentary on Galatians summarizes the full meaning of this for us:

The contrast between Paul's being viewed as a sick and evil magician and his being welcomed as an angel sent by God is a matter Paul can explicate only by referring to Christ. For only in Christ himself are people given the power to perceive strength in weakness. As God's messenger, Paul preached Christ

¹⁹ See W. F. Flemington, "On the Interpretation of Colossians 1:24," in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G. M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 84–90.

(1:16); and that preaching included the conviction that, as he had himself suffered crucifixion with Christ, so in his present life he bears in his body physical scars—and illnesses—that are marks of his association with Jesus (6:17; cf. 2 Cor 4:5, 10). It was then the crucified Jesus Christ lived in him, paradoxically transforming his weakness into strength without removing it (3:1; 2:19–20).

The odiously sick, apparently demonic figure was seen, then, to be in fact an angel sent from God, just as the legally executed criminal was seen to be in fact God's own Son. That correspondence caused the Galatians to welcome Paul, and that correspondence caused their attachment to Paul to be an attachment to Christ.²⁰

Participating in the Suffering of Jesus

The one thing they did not teach me in seminary in the 1970s was how much people suffer. This I learned quickly as a parish pastor in Middletown, Connecticut. But I was ill-equipped at first to give meaning to people's suffering. I did not have the language. I did not understand that language to comfort the suffering comes from the narrative of Christ's passion, from his suffering body, and that to give meaning to the suffering of my members, I had to connect them to Christ's suffering, to help them in their suffering to hide in the wounds of Christ. This is when I realized what it means to take care of the body of Christ, his church—that this corresponded to what the women and Jesus' disciples did in taking care of his body.

But it was only after my wife and I suffered a great loss four months after my ordination that I began to understand the meaning of suffering—that our bodies tell the story of Christ's suffering—and that to take care of suffering bodies means seeing them as the narrative of Christ's passion. But still, full understanding of what it meant to participate in the sufferings of Christ only came when I began to understand for myself, and for the suffering saints whom I served, the mystery of these words of St. Paul: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10:16).

²⁰ Martyn, *Galatians*, 421.