

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

### PRAYING THE PRAYER OF FAITH!

Read James 5:13-16

#### **Introduction**

Over the course of this brief letter, James has discussed key themes to help Christians mature in the faith:

- Standing firm during trials and temptations,
- Living out the Christian faith in practical ways rather than just studying or hearing it,
- Loving selflessly,
- Taming the tongue,
- Humbling oneself before God,
- Trusting in God rather than in wealth, and
- Exercising patience.

He concludes these traits of a disciple with a call to praying with faith.

Each circumstance of life is a time to pray - trouble, happiness, and sickness -- all are an occasion for prayer and worship (James 5:13). James spends most of his time, however, discussing prayer in time of physical infirmity. How does one pray when it is difficult to pray for oneself?

#### **Faith to Ask for Prayer**

*"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord."* (vv13-14)

The suffering needs to pray, the cheerful should sing psalms of praise to God, and the sick should call for the elders of the church, asking them to pray for their need.

Instead of complaining (as in the previous verse and our last lesson), the sufferer should pray. James has the same advice for both the suffering one and the cheerful one: take it all to the Lord. In fact, the two commands could be reversed: sufferers should sing also, and the cheerful should also pray.

James clearly set the initiative on the person in need: "let him call". The hesitancy of people to ask for or to seek prayer from the leadership of the church in such circumstances is a true mystery. I think it's significant that James doesn't put the burden of prayer on the sick person; his responsibility is to call for others to pray for him, not just to pray alone. Of course, the sick person will ask God to help him -- that's taken for granted. We are always to pray -- about everything. But when illness becomes serious, the sick person doesn't need to rely only upon his own faith; he is to call for the elders.

Jesus generally doesn't go out looking for sick people, they come to him for healing -- their coming is a sign of faith, or at least of curiosity. And when they come, Jesus sometimes asks a question to determine their faith or to motivate their faith. In two instances, blind men called out to Jesus. He asked them:

*"Do you believe that I am able to do this?" (Matthew 9:28)*

*"What do you want me to do for you?" (Matthew 20:32)*

This is not a test of faith, but an encouragement to faith, a stimulus to believe. Jairus comes asking Jesus to heal his daughter, but when messengers come from home to report her death, Jesus can see Jairus faltering. "Don't be afraid; just believe," Jesus assures him, "and she will be healed" (Luke 8:50).

In James, the sick person is to "call for the elders of the church," but it is the elders who are responsible to pray the "prayer of faith."

### **Elders of the Church**

But who are the "elders of the church"? The word "elders" in verse 14 is Greek presbyteros, which could designate "an old man," then an official, "elder, presbyter." Are the elders in James' Letter church officials, or mature believers? I would guess that James is referring to the elders as the mature leaders in a congregation who "rule" (Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:17). In James' day, these leaders were looked to because of their faith.

In our day, sadly, we have elders who are leaders characterized not so much by faith, but by longevity and political influence. Some of these are the last people I'd want to pray for me. How many times have I heard older men pray for the sick in such a halting, over-qualified way: "Lord, if it be in your will to heal this person, do it, but if not, give us the ability to accept suffering and death which is our lot." You know this kind of prayer. You don't find this sort of healing prayer in the Bible! In the Bible, people expected God to heal, rather than expected him not to. You find bold prayers, not prayers laden with phrasing to protect us from responsibility in the likelihood that God doesn't heal. We aren't to pray like lawyers!

How can we regain bold faith? By immersing ourselves in the Word and ministering alongside those who do have faith for healing.

### **Anointing with Oil**

The elders are instructed to "prayer over [the sick person] and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14).

There are four reasons I believe this anointing with oil was a sacred act of faith and not just oil for medicinal purposes:

1. Elders are administering the anointing, rather than just anyone,
2. Prayer accompanies the anointing; bold, powerful, believing prayer,
3. The name of the Lord is part of this anointing, and
4. The scripture provides ample precedent for using oil as part of a sacred ritual or act of faith.

It's a little recognized fact that Jesus' disciples "anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (Mark 6:13). Now why would they do that? No doubt Jesus instructed them to do so, and perhaps occasionally did so himself, though we find no other mention in the gospels.

In the New Testament, also, the word "anointing" is closely connected with the Holy Spirit:

*"...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him." (Acts 10:38).*

This verse probably refers to the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3:22), empowering his ministry (Luke 4:1, 14), and fulfilling scripture: "the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to..." (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2).

Believers, too, have "the anointing you received from him ... as his anointing teaches you about all things, and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit...." (1 John 2:20, 27-28), referring to the promised Holy Spirit.

I conclude that anointing with oil was a symbol of the presence of God's powerful Holy Spirit. Oral Roberts (1918-2009), a Pentecostal healing-evangelist active from the 1950s through the 1980s, saw such things as anointing with oil, laying on of hands, etc. as a "point of contact" for a person's faith, a stimulus to faith. I think he's right.

Of course, people can be healed without anointing with oil. Look at Jesus' ministry. People can be healed without the laying on of hands, too. You can find numerous examples in the New Testament. But anointing with oil and the laying on of hands can be a powerful and personal way to minister in the Holy Spirit, and a stimulus to faith.

Should elders always use oil when they pray for the sick, in obedience to this passage in James? No, I don't think this is meant as a restrictive law. But they should be willing to pray and be open to using whatever God desires to encourage faith and represent the presence of the Lord in the healing moment -- and anointing oil can often fit very well indeed.

### Prayer Offered in Faith

*"And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." (v15)*

We've seen several elements in this healing prayer: the faith of the sick person to call for the elders, the presence of mature, faith-filled Christians, their prayers, anointing with oil, and the name of the Lord. But it is faith that James lifts up as the point here. When all is said and done, neither elders, nor oil, nor prayer, nor the name of Jesus effect healing. Rather "the prayer offered in faith" (NIV) or "the prayer of faith" (ESV, NRSV, KJV). Faith in action is the theme of the Letter of James, and he continues this theme to the end of the letter. Notice that it is the faith of the "pray-er" (rather than the "pray-ee") who offers the "effective" (KJV) prayer. Yes, the faith of the sick person is important in asking for prayer, but the elders' "prayer of faith" is what effects the healing.

The "prayer of faith" is said to "save" (KJV, ESV, NRSV) the sick person, or "make the sick person well" (NIV). The word used here is Greek *sōzō*, a common word that means "save, keep from harm, preserve, rescue."

### Healing and Forgiveness

*"And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." (vv15b-16)*

It was common when someone was sick to suppose that he had committed some sin that caused the sickness. That is what Job's "friends" supposed. Sometime after Jesus healed a paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda, he saw him in the temple, and said, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." (**John 5:14**). The rich people in the Corinthian church were guilty of the sins of selfishness and partiality when they fed themselves during the Lord's Supper but didn't provide for their poor brothers and sisters. Paul says,

*"For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason, many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." (1 Corinthians 11:29-30).*

On the other hand, Jesus makes it clear that sickness isn't necessarily caused by sin. You seldom see any rebuke during Jesus' healing ministry. And we read this passage:

*"Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him." (John 9:1-3)*

In our passage, however, James cautions us to consider whether sin is part of what is causing the sickness, for he says about the sick person, *"And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (James 5:15-16)*

In other words, the elders are to assist the sick person to be healed both physically and spiritually, if that is the need, since these can affect each other profoundly.

### **The Power of Confession**

*"Confess your trespasses to one another..." (v16a)*

James reminds us that mutual confession and prayer brings healing, both physically and spiritually. Confession can free us from the heavy burdens (physically and spiritually) of unresolved sin and removes hindrances to the work of the Holy Spirit. Confession to another in the body of Christ is essential because sin will demand to have us to itself, isolated from all others. Confession breaks the power of secret sin. Yet, confession need not be made to a "priest" or any imagined mediator; we simply confess to one another as appropriate. Confession is good but must be made with discretion. An unwise confession of sin can be the cause of more sin.

Real, deep, genuine confession of sin has been a feature of every genuine awakening or revival in the past 250 years. But it isn't anything new, as demonstrated by the revival in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19:17-20. It says, many who believed came confessing and telling their deeds. This was Christians getting right with God, and open confession was part of it.