

God's Plan for Those Who are Sick

Studies in the Book of James No. 9

Please read James 5:13-20

The last several paragraphs of the Book of James are an earnest appeal to let prayer and praise hallow every aspect of life. Even when sickness comes, God is concerned about our need. The Christian is to call for the anointing with oil. The anointing service is designed for the quiet of the sick room and is different from the “divine healing campaigns” popularized today.

1. Prayer and Praise When Afflicted (5:13)

Verse 13 says, “is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms.” The word “afflicted” is a reference to any kind of trouble. It may be mental or personal or domestic or even religious persecution. The Greek word used here means “to suffer misfortune” or “to have hard experiences.” It speaks especially of distress of soul.

People react differently to these situations. Some have gone to pieces physically. Some have grumbled and complained like the Children of Israel did. Some have bitterly blamed God for their troubles. The Bible answer is, “Let him pray.” Prayer may not always remove the affliction, but it brings us sufficient grace to bear it.

The word “merry” does not suggest outward hilarity. The word simply means “to be in good spirits.” In other words, “Is anyone in a happy mood?” Are you fortunate? Is everything going your way? Are you having a wonderful time?

People react differently to such situations. Sometimes periods of cheer and happiness become occasions of forgetting God. (Sickness and trouble will more likely turn a person's thoughts to God, than prosperity and happiness will. We can easily forget God in times of happiness). The Bible answer to the question, “How shall I react in times of happiness?”—is “Let him sing psalms.” This is not suggesting the empty, vain, suggestive songs of the world, but the great hymns of the church. The words of many hymns are beautiful reminders of great biblical truths.

Verse 13, in summary, teaches that all our feelings (feelings of sorrow and feelings of joy), should be sanctified—the one by prayer, and the other by praise.

2. Anointing and Faith When Sick (5:14-18)

These verses constitute the most specific instructions given anywhere in the New Testament, telling how to deal with the physical healing of believers. The instructions given here are clear and simple.

Verse 14: “Is any sick among you? 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.” The word “sick” is a reference to the kind of illness which incapacitates a person for work. The precise meaning of the word is “without strength.” It speaks

especially of the needs of the physical body. The same Greek word is used in John 5 to describe the “impotent” man who couldn’t help himself into the pool. The word “sick” (in verse 14) is a stronger word than the word “afflicted” (in verse 13), and thus it denotes a more serious kind of illness. The elders must not necessarily be called as soon as the head aches or the foot hurts. But more serious (and chronic) forms of illness should lead us to call for the anointing by the elders of the church.

The phrase “let him call” is in the imperative mood. The anointing is a command to be observed—and we violate the Word of God when we are sick and do not call. The phrase “let him call” (middle voice in the Greek) denotes that the one who is sick shall himself initiate the call. The elders don’t go around and urge people to ask for the anointing.

The word “elders” refers to those in the congregation whose responsibility was pastoral oversight and spiritual leadership. (Note the plural “elders.” No one man has a monopoly on God. We are workers together). The words “bishop” and “elder” are sometimes used interchangeably in the Scriptures (Titus 1:5-7). The word elder refers more especially to the maturity of the man; the word bishop refers more particularly to the function of the office.

The command is to “call for the elders.” It is often easier to go far away and mix in large crowds (where one is unknown), and go forward in a “healing line,” than to call for the elders of the local church. We need to be in harmony with our fellow Christians in the home church and feel comfortable working with the brothers and sisters in Christ there.

The elders come to the sick person. The presence of elders at the bedside (or in the same room as the one who is ill), helps to encourage the afflicted person, and makes him more conscious of the effectiveness of prayer. (At a “healing campaign,” only those well enough to attend a public gathering could benefit. Those confined to houses and to institutions are not worthy of much attention by the “healer.” The people who are most seriously sick can scarcely ever get to the public campaign).

To “pray over” the sick person, conveys the idea of stretching out the hands over the patient who is ill, while the prayer is being offered. The gesture symbolizes great earnestness. To “anoint” the sick person with oil, is the translation of a Greek word that was sometimes used for daubing the wall of a building with mortar. And so the elders lightly spread the oil over the top of the head of the one who is sick—during the anointing ceremony.

The “anointing” is to be done “in the name of the Lord”—that is, the entire service must be conducted within the framework of God’s will. The anointing symbolizes the fact that the one who is sick is placing the entire situation into the hands of the Lord. He recognizes God’s plan, and he is content with the will of God, whatever that will happens to be.

J. H. Moore describes the anointing of a younger sister who was seriously ill. After describing the entire service, he concludes: “She felt perfectly resigned to the will of God. She was back in the Potter’s hands, to be molded either for use in God’s house upon the earth, or for use in the great house beyond the stars” (*Our Saturday Night*, page 98). Those words are an indication of what it means to be anointed “in the name of the Lord”—within the framework of His will.

There are various views about the teaching on the anointing. Many ignore the passage. Some teach “extreme unction” (a rite performed for one about to die). Some limit the promise to a future age. The obvious lesson, however, is that believers should claim the promise right now, and place themselves in the hands of a powerful God.

Verse 15 says: “And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.” This tells the effect which the anointing service has upon the suffering person. These are strong promises, and when this ordinance has been practiced with simple faith, God has often seen fit to honor His Word and bless the saints with healing.

The sentence, “The prayer of faith shall save the sick,” sometimes puzzles the reader. The words “shall save” (in this context) must be understood in the sense of restoring to health. The same Greek word is used in Matthew 9:22 where it is translated “hath made thee whole” (or, “has made you well”).

The words, “The Lord shall raise him up,” are sometimes equally puzzling. The word translated “raise up” is sometimes used in the New Testament of “resurrection,” but generally it means “to enable to stand again.” The word is used in this way when the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law is described. Mark 1:31 says that Jesus “took her by the hand and lifted her up.”

There are some who after the anointing did not show physical improvement. They were not enabled to stand up physically, but they did receive a great spiritual lift. Sometimes the “raising up” may be a reference to being “lifted up into eternity.” One brother says, “We had a strong feeling that Anne would be healed, but it was not the way we had wanted. We wanted to see her body healed, but she was healed in a far more significant way. She was lifted into eternity.”

It is only fair to conclude a discussion of this verse by pointing out what is obvious: Believing prayer does not always result in bodily healing. Not even the apostles could be instrumental in healing all the sick people (2 Timothy 4:20). Paul prayed for relief from an affliction in his own body, which was not healed (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). We must understand that the promises here in James 5:15 (and similar promises elsewhere) have an implied condition: The prayer will be granted insofar as it accords with God’s will. It is to be done “in the name of the Lord”—that is, within the framework of His will.

Notice that it is not the elders, nor the oil, nor the prayer—which raise up the sick person. It is the Lord. The elders and the oil and the prayer are mere instruments which God uses.

The latter part of verse 15 says, “And if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.” Not all physical suffering is due to sin in the individual life (John 9:3), but the illness **may** be due to specific sins in the life of the individual. If a person is sick because of particular sins in his life, the prayer for healing will not be heard unless there is first of all a confession of that sin. Verse 16 says that since there may be a connection between sin and sickness, and between prayer and healing—confession is necessary in order that our prayers for one another may be offered more intelligently. The mutual confession of sin (one person to another), rules out the idea of going to a priest to confess one’s sins. We are instructed to confess faults to each other.

Some sins should be confessed only to God, for only He is affected by them. But if other individuals have been hurt by our sin, we should apologize to them (Matthew 5:23-24). And in certain cases of public scandal, our sins should be confessed to the whole congregation.

James concludes verse 16 by telling about the remarkable power of prayer. Tennyson was right when he said that “More things are wrought by prayer than the world dreams of.” God’s telephone number is Jeremiah 33:3! A “righteous” man is one who is genuinely pious (one whose faith is manifested by the deeds of his life). The “effectual fervent” prayer speaks of earnestness and fervency in prayer. Tremendous power is made available through a righteous person’s earnest prayer.

James illustrates the teaching on prayer by referring to Elijah. Verses 17-18 say, “Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.” Elijah prayed that it would not rain, and because of his prayers, not a drop of rain fell for three-and-one-half years. Then he prayed again and the heavens gave rain, and the earth sprouted with vegetation. Elijah was not a superman. He was subject to the same feelings and weaknesses to which we are subject. He had a nature like ours.

The point of these verses is that **if** confident prayer from the lips of a righteous man can become with God a means of controlling the forces of nature, how much more will the prayer of faith be used by the Lord to restore health of body and spirit to a fellow Christian.

There is one final note about the anointing and healing: I’ve heard speakers say that if you are where you ought to be spiritually, you’ll be well physically. But we must be cautious, lest the church become “a healing cult” which places more emphasis on healing the body than on spiritual nurture. To do that—would place the body above the soul—and would shift the major thrust of the church in the wrong direction.

3. Diligence in Reclaiming Backsliders (5:19-20)

In the preceding verses, James spoke of sincere interest in our brothers and sisters who are experiencing times of **physical** sickness or affliction. In the last two verses of James 5, he speaks of our attitude toward those who are **spiritually** sick.

Verses 19-20 give this admonition: “Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know that he who converteth the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.” The reference is primarily to a brother who strays from the truth. Many Christians are woefully weak in their commitment to Christ, and like undernourished children, are too weak to resist disease. We tend to give them up, and often don’t bother as much as we should, to try and reclaim them. We are inclined to censure them for their failures, but James encourages us to seek to reclaim and to restore them. This is a ministry of love and compassion to be carried out in the spirit of Galatians 6:1.

The word “err” (in verse 19) pictures one who has lost his way and wanders aimlessly. It is the word used in Matthew 18:12 when Jesus talks about the one hundred sheep, one of which “has gone astray.” The word speaks primarily of a brother who goes wrong and strays away.

The word “truth” may relate either to doctrine or to conduct, or to both. To “err from the truth” may mean either to renounce the principles of the Christian faith, or to fail to live by its precepts. The word “err” is a strong word (in the Greek language). It refers not so much to a small inconsistency of conduct as to a total rejection of the Christian way of life.

The word “death” speaks of eternal death. One who rescues his fellow brother from the error of his way—saves a soul, keeps him from much sin, and delivers him from the place of everlasting punishment. The phrase “hide a multitude of sins” means that sins are covered so as to be hidden from God’s sight. Psalm 32:1 says it beautifully: “Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, (and) whose sin is covered.” By bringing another person to repentance, forgiveness is procured, and God remembers his sins no more (Isaiah 43:25). Any person who brings a wandering soul back from his crooked ways, will be rescuing his soul from death and thus cancelling innumerable sins.

The work of saving souls and covering sins is God’s work. Men cannot bestow salvation upon others, but God is pleased to use us as His instruments in sharing the news that Christ died for our sins, and that the Lord receives erring people.

James is a Book dealing with practical Christian living. His concluding words are a clear evidence that a burden for souls goes hand in hand with consistent Christian living.

The words of James have been guarded by the Holy Spirit and carefully chosen. They are simple, direct, and plain. They express the sure belief that God can help us. If we walk in God’s way; if we play it straight; if we work with the Lord—He will surely bless us.

Thus we close our study of the Epistle of James. The Bible is such a rich treasure of spiritual wealth, that even one who reads it a thousand times, will always find something new and helpful. It is my prayer that our minds may have been instructed and our hearts uplifted—and that as a result of these studies, we might be better established in the Christian faith.

-Harold S. Martin

BIBLE HELPS

Robert Lehigh, Editor

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of America