

Marks of a Faith That Works

A Faith that Works... ***Prays About Problems*** James 5:13-18

As I have opportunity to share the Good News of salvation in Christ, one of the most common objections that I encounter has to do with the problem of pain. “If your God is good and loving, then why does he allow such suffering in this world?” As long as that suffering doesn’t touch too close to home, then the question – though important – remains somewhat philosophical. But as soon as pain touches you as an individual, then the question is no longer merely philosophical, but very personal and pressing.

One man writes:

“I turned against the Bible and the Christian faith when my mother was dying of the same disease I have. She was a devout Christian, but in spite of her prayers that God would either heal her or take her home, she lived with terrible pain month after month. *I decided that either there isn’t a God or that He isn’t the kind of God you think He is.*”ⁱ

There is not a person in this auditorium who has not at one time or another struggled with the problem of pain. We struggle physically and emotionally, because pain is not enjoyable (unless, of course, you are some kind of masochist). And we struggle spiritually and mentally because we have a hard time reconciling our pain with the belief in a God of mercy and compassion.

James 5:13-18 is largely about *pain*. But James doesn’t leave us with some philosophical platitudes about pain that have little practical application to our lives. Rather, in his down-to-earth, sensible way he tells us what to do about our pain and problems. Let’s read what James has to say:

¹³ Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; ¹⁵ and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. James 5:13-18 NASB

While James says a lot about pain, he also says a lot about prayer. In fact, prayer is mentioned seven times in these verses. And it is mentioned in *each* verse. And really, pain and prayer go hand in hand, don’t they? Have you noticed that it often takes life knocking us to our knees before we begin to take prayer seriously? And James doesn’t just talk about prayer. He lived prayer. His nickname was “Camel Knees” because he had such large calluses on his knees from spending hours and hours in prayer.

In 1952 a doctoral student at Princeton asked Albert Einstein the question: “What is there left in the world for original dissertation research?” Einstein replied: “Find out about prayer. Somebody must find out about prayer.”ⁱⁱ Here, James tells us a great deal about prayer and specifically how it relates to the healing of pain in our lives.ⁱⁱⁱ

1. We are to pray *individually* in times of distress and delight (13).

Notice how he begins in verse 13: “Is anyone among you suffering? The he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises.” Essentially, we are to pray in times of distress and delight.

James asks first: Are you suffering? The word in James’ language means to “endure difficulty, to be in distress.”^{iv} James is referring to the inner stress and struggle caused by external circumstances. It could be brought on by a financial crises, a relational problem, some uninvited medical news, a tragic event that leaves you emotionally at rock bottom. Or maybe you’re struggling with an overwhelming sense of depression. In fact, many are as we approach the Christmas holidays.

James has already said a whole lot about suffering (cf. verse 10). And James is in perfect agreement with the rest of the New Testament. The goal is not to *escape* suffering, but to *endure* suffering. We are to go *through* suffering, not *around* it. “Endure suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ,” Paul tells young Timothy.

Such an idea, of course, does not sit well with the majority of us who are taught by our culture to escape pain and suffering at all costs. James goes on to say that in our suffering our tendency may be to swear (verse 12). But don’t swear, James says, rather to turn to God in prayer (verse 13). David says in Psalm 18:4 “In my distress I call unto the Lord.” What do you do in times of distress? Do you swear? Or do you turn to prayer?

Not everything James says is about pain or difficulty. He also mentions here those who are cheerful. The cheerfulness James is speaking of is not the superficial “plastic smile deny reality” type of happiness. The word refers rather to a deep contentment of heart.^v When we experience this, even in the face of distressing circumstances, we are to sing praises.

Do you know that you have permission to be cheerful at Central Bible Church? Some think that if they are too cheerful the Lord is going to zap them with a bummer. And do you know that you have permission to sing at CB? Maybe you say, “But I don’t have a voice.” That’s not the issue. Joyful singing is for all believers. The question is not, “Do I have a voice?” but rather “Do I have a song?”

2. We are to pray *as leaders* for healing and help (14-15)

Not only are we to pray in times of distress and delight, but also when in need of healing and help (14-15).

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

At first glance, it sounds as if James is giving you and me a no-strings-attached promise to heal every little ailment we might have, including everything from acid indigestion to post-nasal drip!^{vi}

Part of the problem we have in interpreting and applying passages such as this one is our tendency to jump to conclusions about what the author means by what he says. To help us, let me take the key words and issues one by one and see if we can't get a better handle on just what James seems to be saying.^{vii}

Sick (verse 14) = to be without strength, to be weak.
20 times = physical weakness
14 times = spiritual weakness

Sick (verse 15) = fatigued in our fight against sin
Hebrews 12:3, 4

First, notice the *situation* James is speaking about. Someone is *sick*. The English word “sick” appears twice in this passage: James asks in verse 14 “Is anyone among you *sick*?” And then in verse 15 he says, “The prayer of faith will restore the one who is *sick*.” However, in James’ mother tongue *two different* words are used. The word “sick” in verse 14 (*astheneo*) means literally “to be without strength” or “to be weak.” Twenty times (primarily in the Gospels and Acts) the word refers to physical weakness, in many cases illness. But about fourteen times, primarily in the epistles, the word clearly means spiritual weakness. The apostle Paul was quite fond of this word and used it frequently to describe those who are spiritually weak. For example, in Romans 14:1 Paul says “Welcome a man whose faith is *weak*...” And in 1 Corinthians 8:12 he speaks of those whose “conscience is weak.” So we see that the basic meaning of the word is “weakness” and only the context can help determine if it refers to physical sickness, spiritual weakness, or both. I believe that James is referring to both in this passage.

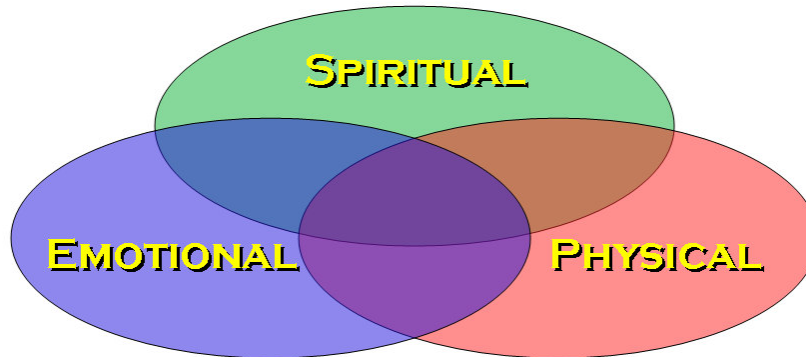
What then does James mean in verse 15: “The prayer of faith will restore the one who is *sick*?” Here James uses a word (*kamno*) which is used only one other time in the New Testament. It’s found in Hebrews 12:3, where it clearly carries the idea of spiritual weakness in our fight against sin:

“For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against himself, so that you will not **grow weary** and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.” Hebrews 12:3, 4 NASB

Here the word “weary” clearly means “to grow weary or faint in the ongoing struggle against sin.” The idea then is to be weary in the spiritual battle. Can you relate to this? All of us, at times, have grown weary, discouraged, worn down by the ongoing spiritual battle of the Christian life.

So in speaking of sickness, using two different words, James seems to have in mind *both* physical illness and the spiritual, emotional weariness that results from our daily battle against sin.

Sickness (“weakness”) is physical, emotional and spiritual



That’s the situation James is speaking about. What is the *solution*? James outlines three steps in the process.

Step 1: The sick person calls for the elders.

“He must call for the elders of the church” (James 5:14). It is left up to the one in need to take the initiative to ask for prayer by the elders. When facing physical, emotional or spiritual weakness, we must not overlook the priority of prayer. Here at Central Bible we send cards, flowers, make visits to the hospital, and regularly pray for those who are sick. But it is not too frequent that the members of our church family take this passage seriously and specifically request the elders to pray for them. Each week I and our leadership team pray through the requests that you turn in on Sunday. I am reminded of the suffering that many of you are experiencing. For some it is physical. For all it is the ongoing spiritual fatigue from the daily battles of discipleship. Let me encourage you to request prayer from our leadership team. We will come to your home. Or you can come, as some have, to our elder team meeting the third Tuesday of each month.

Isn’t it interesting that James does not encourage the one sick to call for those with the spiritual gift of physical healing (1 Corinthians 12:9, 28, 30), but rather to call for the “elders.” Those who are spiritually and emotionally “weak” are to call those who are spiritually “strong” so that through the ministry of prayer they (the weak) may be strengthened.^{viii} This is what Paul is saying when he writes to the Galatians: “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, *you who are spiritual*, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness...” (Galatians 6:1).

Step 2: The elders pray and anoint with oil.

Sometimes people ask me: “Well, just what is the role of an elder at Central Bible Church?” One of my answers is this: we are called to a ministry of prayer. We are not called first of all to be administrators, or committee members, or organizers. We are called to be pray-ers. And let

me remind each of our 16 elders: Our public prayer life for those in need will only be as effective as our private prayer life. We as elders are to be preeminently men of prayer. And for all of us, our ministry in the lives of one another is to be a ministry of prayer.^{ix}

But the elders here not only *pray over with faith*, they *anoint with oil*. The word for “anointing” here suggests the idea of giving honor or refreshment to another person. In Luke 7 a woman anointed Jesus’ feet with ointment (Luke 7:38). Also in the culture of that day a host would anoint the head of his weary guest with oil (Luke 7:46). The Good Samaritan anointed the abused man by the wayside with “oil and wine” (sounds more like a salad dressing!). Anointing with oil, then, is a means of refreshment and encouragement.

We don’t know exactly what kind of oil was used in James day (though I’m sure it wasn’t motor oil!). In any case, the oil was a symbol. As the baptismal waters are a symbol of cleansing, and the wine a symbol of the blood of Christ, so oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The refreshment and healing that comes is not found in the oil, but in the ministry of the Holy Spirit released through the believing prayers of the elders.

Step 3: There is healing and forgiveness.

James then gives an awesome promise in verse 15 which explains the healing that is promised: “And the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.”

First, James says that the pray offered in faith will “*restore*” the one who is weary. More literally, it will “*save*” the one who is weary. James has already used this word in 1:21 “Accept the word planted in you ... which can *save* you.” And then he uses it again several verses later in this chapter when he says in verse 20 “he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will *save* his soul from death.” In the Bible, the concept of healing is a broad concept that begins with an individual being restored to a right relationship with God.

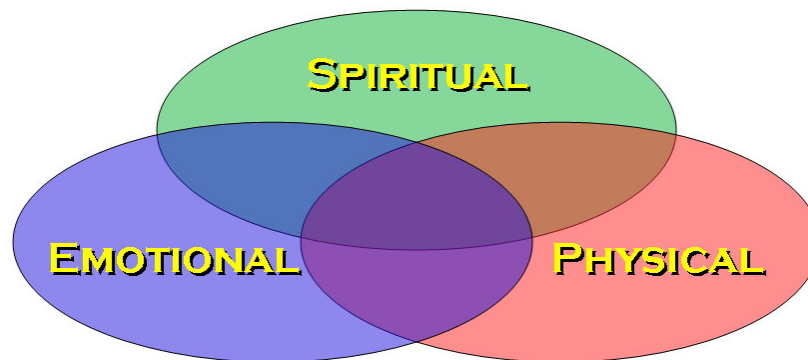
Salvation (or as here “restoration”) in the Bible is *holistic*. It touches upon the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of our lives. Often, these are very intertwined. That’s why James adds: “And *if* he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.” Certain illnesses in our lives *can* be traced to spiritual causes. That is why whenever someone requests prayer and anointing with oil for healing, I ask the person if he/she is aware of any sin that could be the cause of the illness or weakness.^x

The salvation or restoration James is talking about is not only holistic, it is also *progressive*. The test says nothing about the timing of this “restoration.”

We have been saved, we are being saved and we will be saved. Does it include physical healing? Yes, but that aspect is not *guaranteed* until we have our resurrection bodies. While we *do not* know if it is always God’s will to heal the physically sick this side of heaven, we *do* know that it is God’s will for the weak and weary Christian to be strong in his fight against sin and in the face of difficulty. And God promises that strengthening.

Healing (“restoration”) is:

1. Holistic: physical, emotional and spiritual
2. Progressive: past, present and future



I read a quote this past week that brought into perspective the holistic and progressive emphasis on healing in these verses. It is this: *Healing in the Bible is not becoming what we were but becoming all that God intends us to be.*^{xi} We often think of healing as being restored to our previous state. But healing in the Bible doesn't look backwards, it looks forward. While we tend to focus on the physical, we are not really healed until we are made whole on every level of our existence. And that will not take place until we are with the Lord and have new, resurrected bodies. After all, of the 41 people spoken of in the Gospels who received healing, *all of them eventually died*. It was only following their death that they experienced the full healing that God intended for them. It's as if God is saying, "So you're impressed with what I can do with a cancer? Just wait until you see what I can do with a dead person!"^{xii}

Tony Campolo tells the story of visiting a church here in Oregon and praying for a man who had cancer. Later that week, he received a call from the man's wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He *had* cancer." Tony thought to himself: "*Had* cancer?" Whoa, it's happened!"

She went on to say, "He died." "But don't feel bad," she continued. "When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence. After you prayed for him, a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him. Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read Scripture. We prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing. And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."^{xiii} And in experiencing healing, he experienced the salvation that James promises in verse 15.

I've asked myself, "Why is it that we so few call for the elders to pray for them and ask God for the spiritual strength to see them through." We have had several that have requested prayer for physical healing. And by the way, we do pray for that with the assurance that one day that prayer will be fully answered. Are you, fellow traveler, weary from the journey? Are you lacking in spiritual and emotional strength? Why not take that step of faith and request prayer and anointing from the spiritual leadership of the church?

3. We are to pray for one another confessing sin and requesting strength (16)

Such prayer for spiritual strengthening is not limited, however, to the leaders of the church. It is a community affair. Look at verse 16: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

We are to pray *individually* in times of distress and delight. We are to pray *as leaders* for healing and help. And we are to pray *for one another* confessing sin and requesting strength. James calls you and me to public vulnerability. The hardest thing for any of us is to acknowledge our faults and failures.

We are urged to confess; but we so often prefer to conceal and camouflage our sins. During the dark ages, people confessed to a priest. Then Freud came along and said “Go confess to a counselor.” Today many in the church say, “I’m not going to confess to anybody!” And as a result, we have a lot of hidden hurts, habits and hang-ups that fester and enslave us.

I believe that we have a hard time with confession because we see the church more as a “fellowship of saints” than a “hospital for sinners.” When someone tells me, ‘I’ve never told this to anyone’ then I know that we are on the road to recovery.

Dan Allender in his book *The Wounded Heart* says it well:

Those who stand in the black hole of sin—and confess it—can see the bright stars of God’s healing grace; but those who stand in the noonday of their own self-righteousness see only dark, covered skies.

But when we confess to one another and pray for one another, what happens? We are *healed*. The word translated “healed” is sometimes used of healing the physically ill, but it is also used to refer to the spiritual healing of the heart. In the very same context of the passage we have already spoken of in Hebrews 12 we read (vv 12-13):

“Therefore strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be *healed*.”

And Peter says this: “...and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were *healed*.” 1 Peter 2:24 NASB.

COMMUNION

It is this salvation, this “healing,” that you and I celebrate as we come to this table with the bread and the cup. The Captain of our faith, Jesus Christ, is the example *par excellence* of suffering. And His sufferings have resulted in our ultimate healing.

In light of that, as you partake of this bread and cup, if you are suffering – whether it be physically, emotionally, or spiritually – be so bold as to request prayer. At each table is one of our elders (and in some cases his wife). As you come to the table to partake of the bread and cup,

simply indicate your desire for prayer and they will pray for you. If you would like to be anointed with oil, which speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit, request a time with our elder team or a visit to your home. We will honor that request.

This table is also an invitation to each of us to *confess* our sins both to God and to each other. Maybe there is someone in this fellowship that you need to go to and acknowledge wrong and request forgiveness. Or maybe you simply need a friend, another brother or sister in Christ with whom you can openly acknowledge sin and receive God's healing through prayer. You may know someone with whom you would like to pray. Or if not, here next to the cross are some members of our prayer team. They are available during this time to hear your need and pray for God's strengthening.

4. We are to pray as Elijah with *power* and *purpose* (16-18)

The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. James 5:16-18 NASB

Elijah is the "blood and guts" prophet of the Old Testament. And he's the perfect example of what James is speaking of here in these verses. He's chosen, I believe, because he was a weak and weary believer... a person like you and me. In fact, James says just that – "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours." He got depressed. He got discouraged. He needed strengthening. By the way, one thing we learn from Elijah is that you don't have to be perfect to pray!

By the way, if James were trying to stress the certainty and immediacy of *physical* healing in these verses, he probably would have chosen another episode from Elijah's life: the healing of the widow's son in 1 Kings 17. He doesn't do that, however, choosing rather to focus on God's answer to prayer in a context of spiritual conflict.

Here are four things we learn from both Elijah and James about praying with power and purpose:

First, I must ask. James says in 4:2 "You do not have because you do not ask." We must *ask*. Asking is a step of faith. How many of us bypass God's blessing and strengthening in our lives *because we do not ask?* As this applies to us as individuals, so it applies to us as a church.

Second, we must have the right motives. James says in 4:3: "You ask and do not receive, because *you ask with the wrong motives*, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." What was Elijah asking for? Rain. But was it only for himself, so he could be personally refreshed? No, it was for the nation in its spiritual contest with the gods of Baal. James says that we must have the right motives. Is our request for our personal comfort and satisfaction or for the glory of God?

Third, we must have a clean life. James 5:16 says "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." The Psalmist David says, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18).

Lastly, I must ask in faith. James says in 1:6 – “But he must ask in faith without any doubting...” And here in this passage it is the elders who are to ask in faith for the strengthening of the weak believer.

When we ask in faith, with the right motives and from a clean life, God will answer. And just as God brought the refreshing rains to Israel in fulfillment of this promise (Deuteronomy 11:14), so he guarantees his spiritual refreshment in this life and his complete physical healing in the next.

Notes

ⁱ Clipped from article, “Does God Want Me Well?” in the *Discovery Series* (n.d.).

ⁱⁱ Original source unknown; *Leadership*, Vol. 4, no. 1. Cited on www.preachingtoday.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ There’s a lot of talk these days about prayer and healing, even in the secular world. Some doctors are now prescribing prayer for their patients. Of 250 family practitioners recently surveyed, 99 percent believed that a patient’s spiritual beliefs contribute to healing. Eleven medical schools, including Harvard and Johns Hopkins, offer courses in Prayer and Healing. Isn’t it ironic that the medical world sometimes seems to believe in the healing power of prayer more than the church?

^{iv} The same word is used in 2 Tim. 2:9; 4:5. But the idea of suffering being an expected part of the Christian life is found throughout the New Testament.

^v David P. Nystrom, *James* in The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 304.

^{vi} If you understand “sickness” in this verses to specifically mean physical sickness, it is difficult to avoid such a conclusion. It is true that in the Gospels and Acts the same word here translated “sick” is often used for physical sickness. But on the other hand, how would such a promise be understood in light of James emphasis on perseverance in difficulty. Even Job whom he refers to several verses earlier in this chapter underwent significant physical illness from which he was not immediately delivered. The following seemingly unconditional promise “The prayer of faith will restore the one who is sick” has often been an embarrassment for many who have prayed for the physically sick but have not seen healing.

^{vii} I am greatly indebted to Daniel R. Hayden and his fine article on this passage “Calling the Elders to Pray,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July – September, 1981), 258-266.

^{viii} Cf. Gal. 6:1 “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.”

^{ix} In verse 15 it is the “prayer offered in faith” that brings healing. This phrase is used nowhere else in the New Testament. While every prayer is to be offered in faith, James could be referring here to the gift of faith mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:9. In this case, it would be a sense of certainty on the part of the elders that God wants to and will heal in a particular situation.

^x Just what does the Bible say about the relation between sin and physical sickness? During our years on the mission field, I had the joy of working with churches representing many different perspectives on this issue. As I visited and ministered in a whole range of churches, I would often hear statements like: “Sickness is from Satan; God wants you well,” or “If you are not well, your faith is deficient.” Just what does the Bible say about sickness? First, not all sickness is the result of sin. This is clear from Jesus’ words in John 9:1-5 to his disciples about the man born blind. “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” they ask. To which Jesus replies, “This man isn’t blind because he sinned or because his parents sinned, but rather that the glory of God might be demonstrated.” Apparently this man’s sickness (blindness) was not because he sinned, but was intended to declare the glory of God. Some sickness, however, is a sign of God’s discipline. Miriam became leprous as a result of criticizing Moses (Numbers 12). Israel as a nation experienced physical ailments as a result of her sin (Num 16:41-50; 21:4-9). This is also seen in 1 Corinthians 11:28-32. Paul says that some among the Corinthians – because of their sin of carelessness at the Lord’s table – were sick. Some had even died! On the other hand, some sickness is not so much as sign of discipline, but allowed in order to develop us as God’s children. Paul is an example of this when he prays three times for God to remove his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Though we don’t know exactly what that “thorn in the flesh” consisted of, it was most likely some type of physical ailment. Did God take it away? No. He rather told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

^{xi} Ray Pritchard, *Why Did This Happen To Me?* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2003), 85.

^{xii} *Ibid.* 91.

^{xiii} Tony Campolo, “Year of Jubilee,” Preaching Today #212 from the site www.preachingtoday.com.