

EFFECTIVE PRAYER: FOR THE SICK

James 5:14-16a

"Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they should pray over him after anointing him with olive oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will restore him to health; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed."

INTRODUCTION

Tony Campolo, now 80, has served as a sociology professor and pastor. After preaching in a church in Oregon, he was asked to pray for a man with terminal cancer. Campolo prayed boldly for his healing. The next week the man's wife called him. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." Tony briefly thought her words, "had cancer," meant his cancer had been eradicated! But she then quickly added, "He died." Tony Campolo immediately felt terrible. But he'd again jumped to the wrong conclusion, for his wife continued, "Don't feel bad. When he came to 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; 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." But his wife then said, "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." She then said something incredibly profound: "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."

James closes his practical advice to **Christ's** earliest followers by emphasizing the effectiveness of prayer, especially prayer for the *suffering*, prayer for the *sick*, prayer for the *state* (nation), and prayer for those who *stray* from the Lord's fold. Today's focus is Effective Prayer for the Sick. Our two Outline points are Prayer for the Sick Outside the Will of God and Prayer for the Sick Within the Will of God.

I. PRAYER FOR THE SICK OUTSIDE THE WILL OF GOD

James 5:13, "Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray," advised us how to cope with life's ill-experiences in general. **James 5:14-16a** guides us when coping with the particular challenge of ill health. Many bad circumstances we face can be blamed on human evil, like being cheated or robbed. But illness appears to be an attack unrelated to the evil of others, so it invites questions like, "Why did this happen to me?" or, "What have I done to deserve this?" Our greatest faith challenge as Christians often comes when fervent prayers for our healing or for those dearest to us appears to go unanswered. We may then question God's goodness, wisdom, or love for us, much like Julie, age 9, of Buffalo, NY, who wrote her pastor, "I say my prayer before I eat my supper but my mother still makes me finish my spinach and drink my milk."

This is the New Testament's only specific instruction on healing. James sought to encourage our God-honoring boldness; to believe no bodily ailment is beyond the power of our Lord's love to reverse and heal. Yet, we may fall into ungodly traps if we seek to apply these verses wrenched from their New Testament context. For one thing, the four other times James uses the Greek word for "save," *sozo* of **vs. 15 (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20)**, he refers to *spiritual* healing of being saved from our sins and *eternal* death; not *physical* healing or *earthly* death. This cautions us to keep our priority where God places it: upon our everlasting souls in a healthy relationship with our Creator-Savior rather than the temporary health of our bodies. This is especially true when God's answers don't seem to be what we want to hear. A woman was examined by one of her clinic's new doctors. She suddenly burst from the room screaming and running down the hall. Her regular doctor intercepted her to ask what was wrong. When she explained, he took her to his office to calm down. He then marched to the new doctor and demanded, "What's the matter with you? Mrs. Terry is 63 years old and in good health. But she has four grown children and seven grandchildren. How could you

tell her she was pregnant?" The new doctor smiled slyly and replied, "Cured her hiccups though, didn't it?"

James 5:15-16a instructs, "Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the elders of the church, and they should pray over him after anointing him with olive oil in the name of the Lord.¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will restore him to health." Some have distorted these words to mean we are guilty of unbelief if we consult doctors and don't rely exclusively on divine healing. But advances in medical technology result from God's goodness toward our world. **James 1:17** (NASB) reveals, "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." Paul the Apostle experienced "extraordinary miracles" of healing in response to his prayers (**Acts 19:11-12; 28:3-8**). Yet, "Luke, the beloved physician" often traveled with and cared for Paul (**Colossians 4:14**). How often Christians have resorted to divine healing in the nearly 2,000-year history of the Church has often depended upon the availability or lack of availability of trained medical staff and their medicines.

Do you think James meant to specify the only way we can seek divine healing is to be anointed with oil by the leadership of our church? Many New Testament healings were gained by other means, including the "facecloths or work aprons" worn by the Apostle Paul (**Acts 19:11-12**), and neither Peter nor Paul ever gave such instruction to the churches they founded. James did not intend to "straightjacket" our prayers for healing within a narrow procedure. But when we struggle with our faith, having church "elders" invoke "the name of the Lord" over us while "anointing" us with "olive oil," which symbolizes being touched by the Holy Spirit, could greatly encourage us to believe normally impossible healing could be possible. *USA Today* reported in the mid-1990s two HIV+ prostitutes came to a saving relationship with Christ through the ministry of a Pentecostal church in Washington, D. C. After **Jesus'** blood cleansed and healed their souls, their pastor anointed them and prayed for Christ to heal their bodies. He did. At the time of this article, these former prostitutes were joyfully serving their Savior in ministry to other prostitutes.

But does "the prayer of faith" mean if we or our church leaders have enough faith, we can count upon being healed without fail? We cannot separate **James 5:14-15** from **I John 5:14-15** (NIV): "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.¹⁵ And if we know that He hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of Him." We most possess "the prayer of faith" if we faithfully trust God's will despite our wishes for divine healing. In **II Timothy 4:20**, Paul said, "I left Trophimus sick in Miletus" (a small town near Ephesus). Was Paul guilty of lacking "the prayer of faith" to gain divine healing? Paul had a recurrent physical affliction that gave him much grief. He tells us in **II Corinthians 12:7-9** (NLT), "I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud."⁸ Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away.⁹ Each time he said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.' So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me." *The Baptist Challenge* magazine of 1981 commented, "It is strange that, while praying, we seldom ask for change of character, but always a change in circumstance." Yet, God often answers our prayers for a change in our circumstances by changing our character. He knows better than we do what's eternally best for us.

E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973), spent many years in India as a missionary with unusual faith and optimism. He once wrote, "Prayer is surrender—surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boathook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God." Early in the 20th century, a minister was called to a home to pray over a child who was so ill he appeared to be dying. The minister closed his prayer by asking, "If it be Thy will, dear God, spare him." His mother so yearned for her beloved son to live that she exclaimed, "It *must* be His will: I cannot bear *ifs*." The minister stopped his prayer at that point rather than giving God such an ultimatum. Contrary to most expectations, the boy did indeed recover. But the mother, after suffering the agonies of near martyrdom due to her son's godless behavior in his teens, lived to see him *hanged* before he was 22!

We also do not want to jump to the conclusion personal sin is responsible for any prolonged illness. **Vss. 15-16a:** "The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will restore him to health; if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." The "if" of **vs. 15** is a big "if." Sin may be a factor behind our illness. **John 5** records **Jesus** healed a man ill for 38 years. **John 5:14** informs us, "After this, Jesus found him in the temple complex and said to him, 'See, you are well. Do not sin anymore, so that something worse doesn't happen to you.'" When sin is a factor, confession to those sinned against is in order, but such confession should be careful not to exceed the circle of those affected by the sin to avoid promoting gossip. In the early years of the Methodists, those active in cell groups experienced fervency in their relationship with the Lord in part because of the fervency with which they were willing to humbly confess their sins to each other and pray for one another, so they could be healed from sin's power. But sin may not be a factor in illness. **John 9:1-3** reveals, "As He [Jesus] was passing by, He saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples questioned Him: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' ³ 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' Jesus answered. 'This came about so that God's works might be displayed in him.'"

II. PRAYER FOR THE SICK WITHIN THE WILL OF GOD

Somewhere in our prayers when confronting serious illness, we must find a balance between never *expecting* the Lord to heal us, which James discourages, and *requiring* God to heal the sick on demand, which James also discourages. These words, written by an unknown Confederate soldier after the Civil War, can help us to find this balance. "I asked God for strength that I might achieve. I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked God for health that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I asked for—but everything I had hoped for. . . . Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men most richly blessed."

CONCLUSION

A young homosexual man wrote the following testimony, before he became aware he'd contracted AIDS, from which he eventually died. "There are many major barriers to inner healing for the homosexual. These barriers are failure to forgive others, failure to receive forgiveness for ourselves, and failure to accept ourselves. The greatest of these barriers is the failure to accept ourselves. This barrier is worsened by the fear of rejection. From a personal viewpoint, after accepting Christ and moving out to change through Him, I was unable to stand up and be bold for my Lord and Savior when I was exposed to the people from my past. I was in a sort of limbo, trying to walk the fence. Fearing rejection from those friends of my past as being a lunatic, but a greater fear about my new-found love for the Lord—a fear that if I didn't stand up for Him that I would fall out of His grace. We must be willing to not hide our light under a bush. I know it sounds strange, but I would have much rather died for the Lord among non-believing strangers than stand up for my Lord among my non-believing friends.

"It was not until I started writing this that I realized just how stupid this is. It's as though I was trying to keep from offending or upsetting these friends in order to keep the door open to this lifestyle in case I found that salvation wasn't going to work for me. But we all know that is ridiculous. You cannot straddle the fence or walk the middle of the road. You must make a complete 100 percent commitment to the Lord! This is what I have chosen to do and I have no desire to keep that foot in the door of the past. I have asked the Lord for boldness, especially around my old friends, and I know that I will receive this boldness. The Lord is my Savior and I thank God that He has shown me the love and grace to allow me to come to know Him in a personal way. Praise God that I live and that I truly have a new life in the Lord Jesus Christ and that the old sinful defiled 'me' no longer exists. 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless the Lord!'" The Lord chose not to heal the young man of AIDS who wrote this testimony. But he had nothing to fear from death because **Jesus** had already eternally healed his soul!