

## EFFECTIVE PRAYER: FOR THE SICK—PART TWO

### James 5:13-16a

"Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed."

### INTRODUCTION

Paul, a pastor and a chaplain, received an urgent call around 5:00 p.m.: "My daughter-in-law, Betsy, was rushed to surgery in very serious condition. Her husband and relatives are here and they're frantic!" Ten minutes later, Paul found the family huddled in the Intensive Care waiting room, seemingly paralyzed with fear. Paul spotted Nancy, the nurse who'd called him. They'd become friends the year before when she cared for Paul's wife, Carol, before Carol died later that year of diabetes complications. Nancy appreciated God's love and strength in Paul and Carol's lives, but she resisted yielding her life to Christ.

Nancy informed Paul that Betsy had been married to her son, Bob, for a year. Two months ago, Betsy gave birth to their healthy son. But she'd gone into shock that morning. Suspecting massive internal bleeding, Drs. rushed her into surgery. Nancy introduced Paul to her son, Bob, his brother, John, and Betsy's Mom. They consented to Paul praying for them. While they held hands, Paul rebuked the spirit of fear and asked for God's Presence to take control of their situation. He then asked Bob to take a walk with him in the hospital corridors. When Paul asked, "What's your relationship with God?" Bob said he'd made a "real" commitment to Christ as Savior "many years ago." But he admitted he'd not been living for the Lord. As Paul asked about Betsy, tears welled up in Bob's eyes. "I don't know," he whispered. "She told me once she had accepted the Lord but . . . we just never talked about it. Oh, let it not be too late!" His voice broke. Paul assured Bob, "I don't have all the answers but there is one thing I do know. I can guarantee you that God *will* meet you in your darkest hour. I know, for He met me in mine." Bob seemed to calm down.

After they returned to the waiting room, an exhausted, discouraged surgeon gave them bad news: Betsy had a ruptured liver and her body was riddled with cancer of unknown origin. Her condition was grave. Bob was allowed to see Betsy briefly in Intensive Care. Her internist, a Christian, and Paul went with him. Together, they anointed a seemingly unconscious Betsy with oil and prayed earnestly for God to care for her soul and spirit and to restore her body. Betsy's eyelids fluttered and she gently squeezed Bob's hand. Unable to speak due to a ventilator, she nodded slightly as Bob told her how ill she was. His voice became urgent as he said to her, "Honey, I'm sorry I never asked you this before but . . . are things all right between you and God?" While he scanned her pale face for a response, Betsy gazed steadily at him and then very slowly nodded her head and conveyed to him with her eyes, "Yes, all is well with me and God." Bob then told her of their special prayer for her healing. "But if that doesn't happen," he added, "I just wanted to know if you're ready to meet Him." He lightly kissed her ashen face. She then lapsed into a coma.

Bob's brother, John, didn't understand the relief Bob gained as Bob told him of his conversation with Betsy. John wandered out into the hallway. Christian friends who'd overheard this conversation were there by God's design. One woman explained the plan of salvation to John and he embraced **Jesus** as his Savior and Lord right there in the hospital! Paul rejoiced and looked at nurse Nancy, but she avoided his eyes.

That night, Betsy's vital signs dropped due to further hemorrhaging. After hours of intense surgery, a team of Drs. controlled her bleeding and discovered the real culprit: cancer of the placenta; very rare and very lethal. It was contained safely within the placenta until after the baby's birth. But when the placenta separated from the uterine wall, malignant cells were released into her bloodstream and invaded her body.

No sooner had the surgeon left ICU than her nurse detected signs of cerebral hemorrhage. The family consulted Betsy's team of Drs. and decided to transfer her to a research medical facility nearby with the latest and best technology available. It was now daybreak on Sunday morning. Paul shared **Psalms 121** with the family, which closes with, "The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore" (**vs. 8**, NKJV). Afterward, Paul asked Bob, "Are you willing to pray for God's will to be done, whatever it is?" Though he could not release his precious wife emotionally, he entrusted her into God's loving hands by an act of his will. A deep peace then settled over Bob. The frantic look left his eyes; replaced by a calm and steady assurance. God did indeed meet Bob in his darkest hour!

With the senior pastor away, Paul preached in his church's three morning services and enlisted everyone to pray for Betsy and her family. That afternoon, Paul found Bob at Betsy's bedside at the Medical Center. She showed no sign of brain activity. Paul prayed with Bob for God to spark brain waves if He wanted her to live. They watched and waited. No brain waves appeared. Bob then agreed with the Drs. to turn off her respirator at 4:00 p.m. But God had removed the sting of death from Bob's heart, allowing him to rejoice over Betsy's victory over death. He asked Paul to officiate at her funeral the next Sunday afternoon, which would have marked their first anniversary. During one morning service that next Sunday, nurse Nancy set foot inside a church for the first time in seven years. She came forward at the invitation to turn her life over to Christ! During Betsy's funeral service that afternoon, Bob thanked God for giving him Betsy for one year. He expressed confidence of her place with Lord and testified, "It's strange, but this has been the most meaningful experience in my life." Paul then said, "Betsy had to give up her life to give birth to her son. Every gift cost somebody something. The biggest gift God gave us was forgiveness of sin and a personal relationship with Him as well as eternal life. But this gift cost Him the death of His Son, Jesus Christ."

## II. PRAYER FOR THE SICK WITHIN THE WILL OF GOD

Four weeks ago, we began a tour of the last 8 verses of the blunt and practical letter written by James, our Lord's half-brother and a key leader in the earliest years of the Christian Church. James refers 7 times to prayer in **vss. 13-20** to underscore prayer's effectiveness, including prayer for the *suffering*, prayer for the *sick*, prayer for the *state* (our nation), and prayer for those who *stray* from the Lord's fold. Prayer's vital role in a believer's life matches 7 references in **James 5:7-12** to the patience, waiting, and steadfastness in the face of difficult circumstances that is worthy of Christ to whom we have entrusted our everlasting lives. **Vss. 10-11** states, "Brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience."<sup>11</sup> See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome from the Lord. The Lord is very compassionate and merciful." The same Greek verb for "suffering" in **vs. 10** appears in **vs. 13**: "Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray." This Greek word literally means "to be afflicted with bad circumstances." This includes the opposition we face for following **Jesus** and general difficulties of the world in which we live that are not due to sin or personal failure, like the death of a beloved pet, job layoff, romantic heartbreak, or an AC compressor dying in June!

You were asked this question four weeks ago: As followers of **Christ**, are we to assume it's automatically God's will to end our struggles by changing our circumstances? Our close look at **James 1:2-5** emphasized God often has far higher goals in mind than immediate removal of our trials, as The Living Bible explains: "Dear brothers, is your life full of difficulties and temptations? Then be happy,<sup>3</sup> for when the way is rough, your patience has a chance to grow.<sup>4</sup> So let it grow, and don't try to squirm out of your problems. For when your patience is finally in full bloom, then you will be ready for anything, strong in character, full and complete.<sup>5</sup> If you want to know what God wants you to do, ask Him, and He will gladly tell you, for He is always ready to give a bountiful supply of wisdom to all who ask Him." Our study of **Proverbs** taught us that Biblical "wisdom" is "the ability to view our lives and our circumstances through God's eyes." Thus, the greatest benefit of prayer in times of difficulty, of discussing our suffering with the Lord, is not to bring God's will in line with our wishes but to bring our wishes in line with God's will!

This is equally and emphatically true concerning Effective Prayer for the Sick. Today's sermon builds upon our first look at this topic three weeks ago. Illness, unlike suffering in general, seems to be an attack unrelated to the evil of others. Sickness invites questions like, "Why did this happen to me?" or, "What have I done to deserve this?" Our greatest faith challenge as Christian often comes when fervent prayers for our healing or for those dearest to us appear to go unanswered. It is crucial to our peace and maturity as believers to grasp the key distinction between Prayer for the Sick Outside the Will of God and Prayer for the Sick Within the Will of God. We please God by the trust shown by a young girl. Her grandfather saw her kneeling beside her bed one night, with head bowed and hands folded, repeating the alphabet. "What are you doing?" he asked. She explained, "I'm saying my prayers, but I couldn't think what was best to say. So I'm just saying all the letters of the alphabet. God can put them together however He thinks best."

**James 5:14-16** is the New Testament's only specific instruction on healing: "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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." James sought to encourage God-honoring boldness; to believe no bodily ailment is beyond the power of our Lord's love to reverse and heal. In November of 1977, God dramatically cured me of extreme hypoglycemia (the low blood sugar opposite of diabetes) and the amoebic dysentery triggering it, after I'd been declared medically incurable after battling this condition for 18 months. But I first had to agree to change two misguided attitudes revealed to me by God's Holy Spirit as a condition of being healed, and I first came to the place where I prayed: "Lord, if this condition is how I can best serve You, I accept it. I only ask that You give me the health needed to do Your will." We may fall into ungodly traps if we wrench James' words from their New Testament context.

What do you think constitutes "the prayer of faith?" that James promises "will save the sick person, and the Lord will restore him to health"? Does this mean we can reduce almighty God to a formula whereby He *must* fulfill our will if we have the faith to claim from Him what we want, as some teach? Or does this mean we have the faith to trust in the perfection of God's will and to claim His undying love for us, regardless of how He chooses to answer our prayers? 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 from the penalty and power of our sins, not *physical* healing. This cautions us to keep our priority where God places it: upon a healthy relationship with the Lord rather than the temporary health of our bodies. This is especially true when God's answers don't seem to be what we asked for. A little girl named Joyce wrote this note: "Dear God, Thank You for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy." Betsy, in our opening illustration, was anointed with oil and prayed over with faith. Her relationship with the Lord, and Bob's, her husband, were healed after Bob by an act of his will entrusted Betsy into God's loving hands, by praying for God's will to be done whatever it was. Bob's brother John, and nurse Nancy, were brought into an eternally saving relationship with **Jesus** when they experienced Christ's living Presence in Bob despite Betsy's health crisis and death.

## CONCLUSION

Illness and death touch our lives and challenge our faith in so many ways that we will continue our look at Effective Prayer for the Sick next week. Applying Biblical wisdom can inspire within us faith and hope to overcome despair and defeat when faced with a health crisis. Our Savior can also use us to inspire such faith and hope in others. The mission statement of Victory in the Valley of Wichita, KS, is, "To encourage cancer patients & families on their journey by offering HOPE through emotional and spiritual support, while providing practical services to improve the quality of their lives." Its Executive Assistant, Linda Mae Richardson, herself a cancer survivor, illustrates the crucial role godly comfort can provide to those seeking to cope with the emotional whirlpool of cancer: "When I Was Diagnosed With Cancer: My first friend came and expressed his shock by saying, 'I can't believe that you have cancer. I always thought you were so active and healthy.' He left and I felt alienated and somehow very different. My second friend came and

brought me information about different treatments being used for cancer. He said, 'Whatever you do, don't take chemotherapy. It's a poison!' He left and I felt scared and confused. My third friend came and tried to answer my 'whys?' with the statement, 'Perhaps God is disciplining you for some sin in your life?' He left and I felt guilty. My fourth friend came and told me, 'If your faith is just great enough God will heal you.' He left and I felt my faith must be inadequate. My fifth friend came and told me to remember that, 'All things work together for good.' He left and I felt angry. My sixth friend never came at all. I felt sad and alone. My seventh friend came and held my hand and said, 'I care, I'm here, I want to help you through this.' He left and I felt LOVED!"