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Article: Calling the Elders to Pray

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### **Abstract**

Bible students differ as to the exact meaning of the words on healing in James 5:13–18. Many are reluctant to advocate a contemporary use of the “gifts of healings” in the church; but all are unanimous in feeling that the passage is calling for dealing in some way with physical illness among God’s people. Exactly how the teaching of James is to be implemented by the elders of the church, or precisely what circumstances warrant its application, is a matter of debate.

Many see this passage as a formula for church practice which obligates God to grant requests for physical healing. The result of this view is that many Christians are disappointed when God does not answer what He seemingly had promised. God does obligate Himself with His Word, but not to man’s misinterpretations of His Word. This writer suggests that James 5:13–18 is not referring to physical sickness at all, but is rather giving instruction for dealing with persons who are discouraged or depressed.

### **Contextual Considerations**

The interpretation of any verse of the Bible must fit with the thought of the context in both the immediate passage and the overall understanding of Scripture. If James 5:13–18 is a reference to the special healing of physical illness, then it is totally unique to the teaching of the New Testament Epistles and disruptive to the argument of the Book of James.

Where in the Epistles, from Romans through Jude, is there emphasis on a special divine healing of the sick through the ministry of church elders? It is not found in the writings of Paul, who gave

thorough instructions to the elders regarding their spiritual qualifications and responsibilities.

Gaebelein expresses an important observation in this respect. “The Epistles which are the highwater mark of divine revelation, are the Epistles of Ephesians and Colossians; we find nothing in these Epistles about healing of diseases by anointing and prayer. Nor is it mentioned in any of the other Pauline Epistles.”<sup>1</sup>

“Gifts of healings” is merely mentioned in the list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, but there is a curious silence in the rest of that epistle, as well as in all other epistles, as to any instruction for ministries of healing to the sick. Instead, Timothy was told to take wine as a remedy for his frequent stomach problems (1 Tim 5:23), Trophimus was left sick in Miletus (2 Tim 4:20), and Paul discovered that his physical infirmity was part of the gracious working of God in his life (2 Cor 12:7–10). Believers are continually encouraged to view their physical distresses as merely temporary in the working out of a greater spiritual benefit (cf. Rom 8:18–25; 2 Cor 4:16–18); and spiritual maturity comes as believers allow the trials of life to develop in them a patient spirit (James 1:2–4). The dominant emphasis of the New Testament Epistles, therefore, appears to make a “physical healing” interpretation of James 5 suspect.

In his epistle James begins with a plea for patience as a proper response to the trials of life. He then proceeds to clarify the spiritual struggles that confront the child of God. He appeals to active faith in God as the means of combating destructive sins and even Satan himself. Ending as he began, James again emphasizes the importance of being patient in the midst of adversity (5:7–11), and he concludes with a reminder of the importance of gaining victory over sin (5:19–20). Therefore the sudden emergence of instruction dealing with a ministry of divine healing for the sick at the end of a book stressing solely matters of spiritual concern seems somewhat incongruous.

### **The Meaning of “Sick”**

Overcoming a faulty translation of the original Greek text is often an initial step in clarifying a

troublesome passage. Twice the word “sick” appears in the English text of James 5:13–18, but in neither case is it an accurate rendering of the two Greek words used by James.

#### Ασθενεω (astheneo)

The first occurrence of the word “sick” is in verse 14. “Is anyone among you sick?” Here the Greek word is ἀσθενέω from σθενώ (“to strengthen”), with the prefix α (“not”), meaning “to be weak.” This word is used thirty-four times in the New Testament. Twenty times it refers to physical “weakness” (used of those who are sick, predominantly in the Gospels and Acts), and fourteen times it is used as a designation for those who are spiritually “weak” (its primary meaning in the Epistles). That the word ἀσθενέω can have either a literal or a figurative meaning is attested to by Arndt and Gingrich, who give these definitions: “weak, powerless--1. lit. of bodily weakness; 2. fig. of religious and moral weakness.”<sup>2</sup> Also Thayer suggests that the primary meaning of the word is “to be weak, feeble; univ. to be without strength, powerless.”<sup>3</sup> The emphasis of the word is on “weakness”, but the context determines whether it is being used of physical weakness or spiritual weakness. Paul was fond of this word, using it often to speak of those who were spiritually immature and therefore in need of special consideration: “The one who is weak in faith” (Rom 14:1); “but he who is weak eats vegetables only” (14:2); “For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined” (1 Cor 8:11); “and wounding their conscience when it is weak” (8:12).

The point here is that ἀσθενέω is a word which is used in the Epistles primarily to describe a spiritually “weak” person, and therefore James 5:14 should be properly translated, “Is any weak among you?” The context would certainly be agreeable to this rendering.

#### Καμνω (kamno)

The second occurrence of the word “sick” in James 5 is in verse 15: “and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick.” Another Greek word is used in this instance, however. It is κάμνω. The only other occurrence of κάμνω in the New Testament gives insight into its meaning. “For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow

weary (κάμνω) and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin” (Heb 12:3–4). Although the word κάμνω can carry the idea of physical illness, both Arndt and Gingrich<sup>4</sup> and Thayer<sup>5</sup> agree that its primary usage pertains to growing weary or becoming fatigued. Bullinger states that it means “to be weary, faint, as from labor, faint or weary in mind, distressed with labor or anything else.”<sup>6</sup> Many Christians have struggled with some besetting sin and have known the weariness that can come to the mind, especially when that sin touches the point of some weakness. To be “weary” in the spiritual battle is the sense of κάμνω, and James says “the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is weary.”

Comparing these two words for “sick” in this passage, it becomes apparent that they are referring not to physically ill persons but to people who are spiritually “weak” and “weary” in their struggle against sin. The ministry of the elders, as encouraged by James, is not to pray for physical healing, but to pray for spiritual strengthening for those who are discouraged or depressed.

Λαομαι (iaomai)

However, does not the word “healed” in James 5:16 indicate that physical sickness is in view? The Greek word ἰαομαι is definitely used of healing the physically ill, but it is also employed with reference to spiritual healing of the heart. The Book of Hebrews mentions weariness in the struggle with sin (12:3–4), and then reminds the discouraged Christian that God is a faithful heavenly Father who disciplines in love in order to correct the life of the saint (12:5–11). In conclusion he says, “Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble [a graphic picture of what it is to be “weak” and “weary”]...but rather be healed [ἰαομαι]” (12:12–13). Since ἰαομαι here in Hebrews 12 is most certainly spiritual in nature, the similar statements in James 5 would suggest that ἰαομαι means spiritual healing there also.<sup>7</sup>

### **Harmonizing Significant Phrases**

Recognizing that the “gifts of healings” was certainly operative in the early church at the time

James wrote his epistle, it is significant to note that he does not call for persons gifted in this manner. Instead he says, “Let him call for the elders of the church” (5:14). Evidently Polycarp suggested that one of the duties of the presbyters was “visiting all the sick”; however, nowhere in the Bible (apart from this questionable passage in James 5) are elders encouraged to have a ministry of physical healing. Their very function as spiritually mature persons is not only to give leadership to the church but also to support the saints in their spiritual struggles through instruction and encouragement. James tells the “weak” to call for the strong (“elders”) that they may be strengthened through a spiritual ministry of prayer. Paul makes a similar appeal to the elders of the church when he says, “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal 6:1). Certainly the fact that James calls for the “elders” is further evidence that he has a spiritual ministry in mind—not a healing of the physically sick.

It seems obvious that James is dealing with the problem of a believer’s conflict with sin, for he states clearly, “if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him” (5:15), and “confess your sins to one another” (5:16). Observing these phrases, the majority of evangelical Bible expositors suggest a specific category of illness spoken of here by James. They feel that James is speaking of physical sickness caused by sin in a person’s life. Henry suggests that “where sickness is sent as a punishment for some particular sin, that sin shall be pardoned, and in token thereof, the sickness shall be removed.”<sup>8</sup>

Now it is readily granted that the Bible does indicate a category of sickness caused by sin in a person’s life. The majority opinion of conservative Bible teachers that James 5 is referring only to those forms of illness that are caused by God as a result of sinful behavior certainly does have a biblical precedent. Miriam was stricken with leprosy because of her critical words against Moses (Num 12); Israel suffered the misfortune of physical judgments from God as a result of her sin on a number of occasions (Num 16:41–50; 21:4–9); and the Corinthian church knew the pain of divine scourging as many were “weak and sick” (1 Cor 11:30) due to their flagrant violation of the Lord’s table. Under those

kinds of circumstances, confession of sin through humble and contrite prayer certainly brought a cessation of God's scourging ministry and a consequent healing of the physical ailment.

James 5 has several references to sin as a factor contributing to the individual's distress. Furthermore forgiveness of sins (5:15) and confession of faults (5:16) are an unmistakable part of the healing process along with fervent prayer. This is not to assume, however, that the malady spoken of by James is physical.

The association of this passage in James with Miriam, Israel, and the Corinthian church requires more than surface similarity; it must be supported by the context and vocabulary of the verses involved. In fact, in the opinion of this writer, the words and contextual thoughts of James 5 do not support the view that "sickness due to sin" is intended in the passage (although there does seem to be an allowance for certain physical ramifications as a part of the individual's problem). The emphasis of James is clearly on the emotional distress and spiritual exhaustion experienced by God's people in their deep struggle with temptation and their relentless battle with besetting sin. Deep emotional and psychological pressure will often manifest itself in physical ways as has been demonstrated in the study of psychosomatic illness, and in that sense there may be physical aspects to the problem spoken of by James. The real difficulty under consideration, however, is not primarily physical illness, but spiritual weakness and weariness resulting from the believer's battle with besetting or recurring sin. One of the dilemmas faced by serious Christians is the discouragement that comes from being continually overcome by some sin in the area of their weakness. Even in the midst of victory over that sin there may be a great weariness and need for support from the elders of the church. But, James says, "if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him" (5:15), implying that this is true when there is an appeal for help to the elders and prayer to God for those sins. If the problem is an interpersonal conflict, then there must be appropriate confession made to the offended person (5:16), as well as to the Lord. This instruction by James is certainly a fitting climax to a letter dealing with the temptations, sins, and struggles confronted in the Christian life. The concluding remarks by James

confirm the importance of this spiritual ministry of the elders to those who are “weak” and “weary,” when he says that such help “will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins” (5:20). The evident promise inherent in the phrase “the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick” (5:15) is an ever-lurking embarrassment for many who have known failure in trying to apply this passage to the physically ill. “The prayer offered in faith” is a prayer prayed in the full realization that it is God’s will to answer that prayer in the manner desired; yet it is a difficult thing to know for sure in any given circumstance whether it is God’s will for a certain person to be healed. Unless one is willing to postulate that it is God’s desire to heal all sickness at all times—a teaching clearly contrary to Paul’s experiences recorded in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10—the elder is left to subjective feelings and hopeful speculations in trying to discern the actual conditions of God’s will in any specific case of illness.

On the other hand, if the elder is to pray for victory over sin and for encouragement in the spiritual conflict for a “weak” and “weary” saint, then there is really no question concerning God’s will. God is never pleased with sin and is therefore always ready to forgive and to strengthen the believer who comes to Him by faith. The Apostle Paul says, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ” (2 Cor 2:14). Consequently to see in James 5 a ministry of elder support for the spiritually “weak” and “weary” is considerably more consistent than seeing physical healing in response to “the prayer of faith” in every situation.

Anointings with “healing oils” are a common part of many healing ministries, and the practice claims its biblical support from James 5. Evangelical expositors, however, have found the mention of “anointing him with oil” (5:14) a perennial problem and have attempted to spiritualize, dispensationalize, and even ignore its presence.

However, the process of anointing with oil as a means of divine healing has a weak biblical basis, apart from James 5. In all of the many occurrences of physical healing mentioned in the Book of Acts, not one situation included the use of oil. Furthermore Jesus Christ is never said to have used oil in His

healing ministry; and only Mark 6:13 mentions that the Apostles anointed the sick with oil. Thus “anointing him with oil,” as a means of healing the physically ill, is another peculiar element in this passage that bears rethinking.

The word for “anointing” is the Greek word ἀλείφω (aleipho) said by Trench to be “the mundane and profane word” as opposed to χρίω (chrío) which he says is “the sacred and religious word.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore James is not suggesting a ceremonial or ritual anointing as a means of divine healing; instead, he is referring to the common practice of using oil as a means of bestowing honor, refreshment, and grooming. It was in this sense that the sinful woman anointed (ἀλείφω) Jesus’ feet with ointment (Luke 7:38) and that a host would anoint (καταλείφω) the head of his guest with oil (Luke 7:46). Jesus also suggested that a person who was fasting should not appear sad and ungroomed, but should anoint (ἀλείφω) his head and wash his face (Matt 6:17).

If James is speaking of a ministry to the “weak” and “weary” in their struggle with temptation, then “anointing him with oil” would be a well-understood means of refreshment and encouragement. Instead of dragging around in a disheartened and disheveled condition as a result of extreme discouragement, James suggests that the person should be uplifted in faith toward God as the elders applied the refreshing and honored anointing with oil.”

### **The Grand Illustration**

Finally there is a crowning effect in the illustration chosen by James to conclude his argument. His choice of Elijah (5:17–18) from among all the heroes of the faith is both deliberate and perceptive in that he most effectively pictures the possibility of effective prayer by a “weak” and “weary” saint. James refers to Elijah’s prayer that it would not rain for three years and six months. While this prayer as such is not recorded in 1 Kings, it may have been made some way in connection with his pronouncement to Ahab about God’s withholding of rain as His displeasure against Israel’s sin (1 Kings 17:1). But why did James not refer to Elijah’s dramatic prayer for the healing of the widow’s

son (1 Kings 17:17–24)? Surely James would have chosen that prayer if he were seeking to illustrate effective praying for physical healing. The fact that he chose the first incident demonstrates that he sought to picture fervent prayer in the midst of conflict with sin rather than a prayer ministry for the sick. Furthermore the great prophet Elijah is as well known for his weakness as he is for his strength. When James says that Elijah was “a man with a nature like ours” (5:17), he is obviously referring to that one unforgettable event when the prophet became weary in his continued contest with the nation’s sin. His discouragement turned to depression, and he fled in fear and cried out to God to take his life (1 Kings 19:1–5). Even great men of God are in need of God’s special strengthening when they become weary in the battle. This picturesque incident from the life of Elijah gives strong support to the view that James is referring to a spiritual ministry to the “weak” and “weary” rather than to a ministry of healing for the physically sick.

1. Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Annotated Bible* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1970), 4:40.
2. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 115.
3. Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (4th ed., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 80.
4. Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 403.
5. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 323.
6. Content Management System by Galaxie Software E. W. Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), p. 699.
7. Richard Wolff, *General Epistles of James and Jude* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1969), p. 82.
8. Matthew Henry, *Commentary of the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), 6:999.
9. Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 9th ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1880), pp. 136-37.