

Power of Prayer

James 5:13-18

1

Introduction

This passage has been a battleground for centuries. Various groups have used these verses as a proof text to justify their particular beliefs. The passage raises a number of difficult interpretive questions. What kind of suffering does James have in view in verse 13? What type of sickness is in view in verse 14? Why are the prayers of the elders different from those of other believers (vs. 14-15)? What is the anointing with oil described in verse 14? Does the prayer of faith (vs. 15) always restore the sick? How does sickness relate to sin (vs. 15)? What type of healing is in view in verse 16? Why does James insert an illustration about rain (vs. 17-18) into the middle of a discussion of healing?

The answer to these questions and a proper interpretation of the passage lies in understanding it in its CONTEXT! One cannot properly interpret a passage of Scripture apart from its context. The context provides the flow of thought in which a verse or passage exists.

2

Introduction

James wrote his epistle to Jewish believers who had been forced to flee from Israel by the persecution recorded in Acts 8:1-4. In 1:1 he referred to them as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” Being both Jewish and Christians, they faced hostility from the pagan culture in which they lived. Knowing that, James opened his epistle with an exhortation to patiently endure trials (1:2ff.). In chapter 5 he returned to that theme. The first six verses described the persecution they were suffering at the hands of the wicked rich. Some suffering even to the point of death (vs. 6). Verses 7-11 call for patient endurance of trials and persecution. James encouraged those about to collapse under the weight of their afflictions to prop up their hearts and continue in their endurance.

3

Introduction

In view of the overall context of the epistle, particularly chapter 5, it is not surprising that James mentions suffering in 5:13. He calls on those who are suffering the persecution discussed in 5:1-11 to pray, since prayer taps the source of spiritual endurance. It would have been surprising if, in a letter to struggling, persecuted believers, James had neglected to mention prayer. A strong commitment to prayer is a prerequisite to enduring suffering and affliction. The theme of verses 13-18, then, is prayer, and it is mentioned in every one of these verses. James’s challenge to prayer touches the prayer life of the entire church. Individual believers are called to pray in verse 13, the elders in verses 14-15, and the congregation in verse 16. As the context and the content of this section make clear, the subject is not physical illness or healing. Instead, its concern is with healing spiritual weakness, weariness, exhaustion, and spiritual depression through prayer, as well as dealing with the suffering and sin that accompanies it.

4

James 5:13-18

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? 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. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails 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 land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

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Prayer and Comfort

James 5:13

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.

The first object of James' care here are "suffering" believers. "Suffering" does not refer to physical illness, but enduring evil treatment by people.

This term is used only two other times in the Bible - in 2 Tim. 2:9; 4:5. James is not addressing those suffering from physical disease, but those being persecuted, and abused.

James states that the antidote to their suffering is to pray. Prayer is essential to enduring affliction. God alone is the ultimate source of comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-4; 1 Pet. 5:7). The Greek tense of the verb "pray", could be translated "let him keep on praying." When life is difficult, when believers are weak in faith, weary with persecution, and crushed by affliction, they must continually turn to God for strength and comfort.

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Prayer and Comfort

James 5:13

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Those who manage to maintain a “cheerful” attitude in their suffering are to “sing psalms”. “Cheerful” describes those “well in spirit or having a joyful attitude”. It has nothing to do with those who are physically well. The suffering and the cheerful are both to pray. The one is to plead with God for comfort, the other is to sing praises to God for comfort given. Praise and prayer are closely related; praise is actually a form of prayer (Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2). Both are essential for spiritual strength.

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Prayer and Restoration

James 5:14-15

Is anyone among you sick? 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. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Here is the most misunderstood and disputed portion of this passage. At first glance it appears to be teaching that sick believers can expect physical healing through the prayers of the elders. But such an interpretation is out of harmony with the context. And as noted in the previous point, the suffering James has in view is evil treatment, not physical illness.

Though the word translated “sick” can carry the meaning of illness, it can also refer to emotional or spiritual weakness (Acts 20:35; Rom. 4:19; 8:3; 14:1-2; 1 Cor. 8:11-12; 2 Cor. 11:21, 29; 12:10; 13:3-4, 9). Translating “sick” as “weak” (which is the predominant usage in the epistles) allows us to view this verse in a different light. James is moving beyond the suffering believers in verse 13 to those who have become weak by their suffering.

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The weak are those who have been defeated in the spiritual battle, who have lost the ability to endure their suffering. Having hit bottom, they are not able to pray effectively on their own. In that condition, the spiritually weak need the help of the spiritually strong (cf. 1 Thes. 5:14).

That help, James says, is to be found in the “elders of the church”. Weak, defeated believers are to go to them and draw on their strength. They are to “call” (which means “to call alongside”) the elders to come and pray for them. It is the same thought that the apostle Paul expressed in Galatians 6:1: “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” The wounded, exhausted, broken sheep are to go to their shepherds, who will intercede for them and ask God for renewed spiritual strength on their behalf.

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This is an important ministry of the church’s pastors and elders. The apostles acknowledged its priority when they said, “We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

The anointing with oil in the name of the Lord done by the elders is not a reference to some symbolic ceremony. The word “anointing” here is not the proper word for anointing in a ceremonial fashion. Rather it means to “rub” as in done in applying a medical ointment.

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It may well have been that the elders literally rubbed oil on believers who had suffered physical injuries to their bodies from the persecution (Luke 10:34). Medical science was certainly in a primitive state and there were few trustworthy doctors. It would have been a gracious, kind act on the part of the elders to rub oil on the wounds of those who had been beaten.

The elders' ministry of intercession and restoration is to be done in "the name of the Lord". Any truly biblical encouragement must be consistent with who God is (which is what His name represents). To do something in the name of Christ is to do what He would have done in the situation; to pray in the name of Christ is to ask what He would want; to minister in the name of Christ is to serve others on His behalf (cf. John 14:13-14).

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Prayer and Restoration

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The result of the elders' comfort and ministry of intercession is that their "prayer of faith will save (restore) the sick". Again, the word sick does not refer to physical illness but to the spiritually weak, defeated believers.

The idea here is that the elders' prayers will deliver weak, defeated believers from their spiritual weakness and restore them to spiritual wholeness. Those prayers, of course, are but a channel for God's power; it is the Lord who will raise up the weak. "Raise up" can also mean "to awaken" or "to arouse."

If sin has contributed to or resulted from the spiritual weakness and defeat of a fallen believer, that sin will be forgiven him when he cries out to God for forgiveness. The elders can encourage him to confess, help him discern his sins, and join their prayers for his forgiveness to his.

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So What ...

Take a moment to evaluate your prayer life...

I would encourage you to create a prayer journal.

It is appropriate to pray for your own needs and struggles, but you should also pray for others.

Make a list of those who need to come to Jesus, those who are struggling.

Be sure to take time to worship and praise God for who He is and what He has done.