

James 5:13-20

by

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Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. 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; 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. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be restored. 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 might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:13-20 NASB)

On Sunday evening November 8, 1992, at five minutes before 7 p.m., Edgar Gray died of cancer. Ed had been an elder for many years. It had only been a few weeks before that he was informed about his cancer and that it was throughout his body.

Shortly after Ed's funeral I received a telephone call from one of our other two elders wanting to know why it happened. What I didn't know at the time was that the two elders had obeyed James 5:13-20 to the letter and expected Ed to regain his health within the next few days of their visit. The phone call lasted a couple of hours and I was quite frustrated because I had no good answers to give to the questions put before me. Questions like "Why does God tell us these things ("and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick") if He does not respond to them?" and "If we can't trust the Bible here, where else should we not trust it?"

The only answer I could think of at the time was that since James was one of the earliest letters to be written¹, possibly this had reference to the apostolic age and therefore was not for us, even though there is no suggestion of that in the text. This was the beginning of a long study for me.

I believe the Bible to be the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God. However, translations of that inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God are not inspired, inerrant, nor infallible; which is where my problem stemmed.

A key to understanding this section of Scripture is paying close attention to the word *sick*. What follows is a phrase by phrase analysis of the text at hand.

Is anyone among you suffering? The word kakopathei² generally means suffering misfortune. This may be a bad circumstance, an injury or an illness; any physical or emotional

¹46 AD.

² 3rd person, singular, present indicative of kakopatheo; a verb form of kokos

problem. **Let him pray.** If you are suffering, sick or hurt, you yourself need to pray concerning the circumstance.

Is anyone cheerful (literally feeling good)? **Let him sing praises.** Psallo is used here. It literally means to sing with a harp.

Is anyone among you weak? Although this word gets translated as *sick* in most translations, a cursory study of other passages with the same word will give you a slightly different meaning. The Greek word used is asthenes and it is used quite often in the New Testament. Here are three prime examples:

I Cor. 11:30 - For this reason many among you are weak (asthenes) and sick (arrostoi) and a number sleep.

Rom. 4:19 - And without becoming weak (astheneo) in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old...

Acts 20:35 - In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak (astheneo) and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

In these three examples we see asthenes used referring to spiritual weakness, weakness in faith, and financial weakness, respectively. The word means weakness in general, so the context of the passage must determine the kind of weakness that is being discussed. It may indeed mean bodily weakness, and often does, but *the context of the passage must determine what kind of weakness it is*. In First Corinthians 11:30 we see a word that more generally means sick: arrostoi³ and it is not used in the James 5 passage (it is used in Mt. 14:14; Mk. 6:5, 13; 16:18). Another word that means sick or feeling bad is the word used in verse 13; kokos. What James seems to be dealing with in verse 14 is a spiritually weak brother; a backslider. Possibly someone who has yielded to the temptations James spoke of in chapter 1. If anyone has become weak in this way, **Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him,**

If you have a physical problem (kokos), you pray. If you have a spiritual problem, you call for the elders and have them pray for you. The elders are the overseers and shepherds (pastors) of the church. It is their responsibility to deal with the spiritual problems of the individual members of the church. That's all part of shepherding. Also, if a spiritually weakened person calls for the elders, this is an indication of repentance. Therefore the elders should pray for restoration.

Understanding this also reinforces the fact that the elders are to be the spiritual leaders of the church. Too often the elders spend so much of their time concerned with the leak in the roof that they never notice the spiritual growth, or the lack thereof, of those within their flock. Elders need to be (1) men of prayer, for prayer is what brings us to the throne of God and (2) men of concern for those they shepherd, for what kind of shepherd would allow their sheep to roam and not do anything while watching over them? People need to know their elders are concerned for them before they will call them for help. And elders need to be (3) men of priorities; how many times have we majored in minors and minored in majors. I dare say that the majority of time in the last elders' meeting, in most of our churches, was spent on the mundane things of everyday

³ nominative, plural, masculine of arrostos

church life rather than whether Bro. Joe Schmoe was developing into the Christian he ought to be.

anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; There are two words used for anointing in the New Testament. The first is chrio which is the official ceremonial anointing (see Lk. 4:18, Acts 4:27; 10:38, II Cor. 1:21, Heb. 1:9). This is what Samuel did with Saul and David. However, this is not the word James uses. He uses the word aleiphein which would be the anointing a person might get when he visits someone's home or the kind of anointing that might be used to clean a wound or to clean someone's hair.⁴

and the prayer offered in faith will save the weary one, the word translated as *save* is the word sosei⁵ which means *save* (which is how the KJV translates it). The NASB translates it as *restore* which is acceptable because it fits the context of the passage. The word *weary* however is translated as *sick* in both the NASB and KJV as well as most other translations. The word used here is not arrostos nor is it asthenes, but is a word used only three times in the New Testament: kamno. The word James uses is kamnonta⁶. Here are the other two passages:

Heb. 12:3 - For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary (kamete: second person, plural, second aorist, subjective of kamno) and lose heart.

Rev. 2:3 - and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary (kekopiakes: second person, singular, perfect, indicative, active of kamno).

The only other use of the word kamno in the New Testament is in James 5:15 and for some reason is translated as *sick* when it should be translated as *weary*. If we place the word *sick* in either of the other two passages that “weary” (kamno) is used, it loses all meaning.

The rest of the book of James deals with restoring a backslider, which is only natural for that is what he has been dealing with since verse 14.

and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. A backslider certainly has sins to repent of and now he has the elders of the church to help him in his repentance and also to pray with him and for him.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, It's hard to backslide when you confess to someone else and they know your sins and also what it is that tempts you.

so that you may be healed. This word *healed* could also be translated as *delivered* or *restored*. It is often translated in the Gospels as *healed* meaning restored to health.

The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, Elijah was not super-human, he was tempted by his circumstances, tempted in many ways to backslide ***and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.*** James says all this to demonstrate the power of prayer, for it is prayer and repentance that restores the backslider. ***And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit.***

⁴ The ancients used olive oil to clean their hair. They would put the oil in the hair and use a fine-toothed comb to remove the oil as well as any dirt that might come with it.

⁵ third person, singular, future, indicative, active of sozo

⁶ accusative, singular, masculine, present participle of kamno

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins. James concludes his short letter by telling of the nobility of trying to restore the backslider. He does not give us some magic formula for healing a person on their deathbed. He instead tells us how to deal with a person who is headed for eternal death because they have given up on the God of life.

If the church is to regain her backsliders and see continued growth, instead of constantly trying to replace the people we lose, we need Biblical elders who know the power of prayer, the people they lead, and what's important as opposed to what's not.