

# Health & Healing

James 5:13-16

James began his epistle telling the brethren to count it all joy and call on God in the midst of trials in order to receive wisdom, become patient, and grow into maturity (1:2-5). He returns to these topics to emphasize the power of prayer. Until the resurrection, we will always have suffering and sickness among us and therefore the opportunity to pray for health and healing.

## Summary of the Text

James asks three questions to address three situations: suffering, cheerfulness, and sickness. Is anyone among you suffering, then pray (v. 13a). We are to take our pain to the one who knows and cares (cf. 1 Pet. 5:7). Is anyone cheerful? Then sing psalms (v. 13b). The psalms are sung prayers, so thank the Lord musically when you're encouraged and let the word of God dwell in you richly. Is anyone sick? Then call for the elders to pray over and anoint with oil in the name of the Lord (v. 14). The prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him up. In addition, if he has sinned, he'll be forgiven (v. 15). Not only are we to seek God's forgiveness, but forgiveness from one another and be healed from the brokenness of sin between us (v. 16a). The fervent prayer of a righteous man helps very much (v. 16b).

## Pray for Yourself

Functional atheists live as though God doesn't exist. Does He know all things, inhabit all places, possess all power, and receive all who call upon Him in truth? If you believe and live these things, then prayer flows naturally. Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of Lights in whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (1:17), James says. This remains true when you suffer. Notice that he makes no mention of sin in connection to praying during suffering. Emotional and physical agony naturally make us think about what we might have done to bring it about, but if the works of the flesh are not evident (cf. Gal. 5:19-21), then know that God sends trials to refine His people like gold in the fire. James just mentioned Job who suffered for righteousness, and that righteousness continued as his wife told him to curse God and die and his friends insisted there's no way all this tragedy happened without sin on his part. While admitting his general sinfulness (Job 14:1, 4), Job refused to be like all the other ancient scapegoats; he maintained his innocence and persevered. If we suffer because of our sin, we should confess it, receive forgiveness, and walk in the light as forgiven and cleansed children of God. For the forgiven believer, no sin is permitted to haunt or curse. Pray to the one who can heal your suffering now, and who certainly will when you die. If you talk to God about it first and as needed, you won't be swallowed by doubt or despair. The Lord hears and answers prayer. He is not a slot machine and prayer is not like reaching a claw into heaven to grab a prize. As our perfect Father, He hears and makes a decision. Sometimes we suffer, are forced to pray, and learn that we aren't God—always a helpful reminder.

## Sing Psalms

If you're suffering, you must pray. And if you're cheerful, is singing optional? James doesn't think so. Even though these exiles were suffering, relief and cheerfulness intervened. Even soldiers tell jokes in the trenches. Solomon writes, "All the days of the afflicted are evil, but he who is of a merry heart has a continual feast" (Prov. 15:15). Some are suffering, some are sick, some are cheerful, and there's no schism in the church. While changes are constantly and life can alter dramatically in a moment, staying consistent in prayer steadies us. Paul knows how to be abased and how to abound because he prays (Phil. 4:12). The strong temptation to forget God in prosperous times is overcome by singing psalms and letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly (Col. 3:16). The verb "sing psalms" is *psallo*; if you're cheerful, you psalm. The blessed man in the Psalm 1 doesn't walk in the counsels of the ungodly, stand in the path of sinners, or sit in the seat of the scornful but is

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planted by the rivers of water and thus bears fruit in season; whatever he does prospers (1:1-3). Singing psalms also reminds us of the persecuted and suffering, and therefore the need to pray for them.

## Pray with the Elders

The third circumstance James addresses is sickness: “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” (vv. 14-15). We see in earliest days of the New Testament that local churches are governed by elders (cf. Tit. 1:5) who are known to the individuals in the congregation. They’re not faith-healers or traveling gurus, but qualified shepherds ready to serve the sheep. “James’s instruction for the sick to call for the elders to pray for him is not simply a statement about the office and responsibility of elders in the church,” Jeff Meyers writes, “rather it is more centrally a statement about the import of the church itself in the life of the believer. For the prayers of the leaders, as the authorized representatives of the body, are simply the prayers of the church and embody the petitions of the entire congregation.” This is the only place in the New Testament epistles that address physical healing directly, and there’s no reason to think the oil itself is medicinal. If it was, the sick person or someone else could just administer it. Oil is symbolic in Scripture. Kings and priests are anointed with oil to set them apart and empower them for service (Ex. 40:15; Num. 3:3; 1 Sam. 16:13). It signifies health, strength, and life. The Lord Jesus was anointed for His burial and resurrection (Matt. 26:6-13; Mk. 16:1). The unity of the brethren is like the oil on Aaron the high priest’s head (Ps. 133:1-2), meaning our representative high priest was blessed and strengthened by God to worship Him and teach us. Those who face prolonged sickness endure lonely and extended isolation. Rather than suffer alone, they should call the elders, be anointed, and pray. We participate in many meaningful symbolic actions all the time. Shaking hands communicates value for the other person, recognition of his humanity, belief he is safe to touch, and pleasure in greeting. It’s not the oil but the Lord who raises the person up, and the instrument to contact Him is the prayer of faith (v. 15). If the Lord raised him up in each and every instance, then no one would ever die, so this prayer obviously depends on the will of God in the particular situation. Calvin and Luther thought James was talking about the apostolic gift of healing (cf. Acts 3:6), but this appears to be a part of regular congregational life. If sins are involved, those will be forgiven (v. 15). It takes faith in God and friendship with one another to do this.

## Pray for Others

The last prayer commanded is for one another. James says to confess sins to one another and pray for one another so that we will be healed (v. 16). Confession is the act of seeking forgiveness, asking the person to forgive the inexcusable and not hold it against you. “Excuse me” works for accidental inconveniences like bumping into someone. But if you steal something, “Excuse me” won’t cut. Saying “sorry” indicates sorrow about something that happened, but you can be sorry about things that were not your sins. James says to take it upon yourself to put it right. How many people are negatively physically impacted because they have not forgiven their parents, ex spouses, siblings, friends, and so on? We know that grievous sin against God one another resulted in physical sickness and death in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:30). The “righteous man” here is he who forgives his neighbor (v. 16). It’s hard to confess your sins to the person you wronged, but not as hard to pray for him. It’s hard for him to forgive you, and even more to pray for you. We’re to imitate our Father, the prodigal’s Father, ready for his son to come home. The forgiven receives healing, and the prayer of the one who forgives accomplishes much. Why? Because God loves to bless those who bless in His name.