

God Answers Prayer

James 5:13-20

James 5:13-18 - *“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing songs. 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.*

¹⁶Confess 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 Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth produced its fruit.”

Background Notes

Prayer is the theme of this last section of the epistle of James, and it's a very encouraging passage of Scripture. However, it is also a very controversial passage of Scripture because of the verses about healing. What exactly do these verses mean? Is this promise of healing applicable for today, or was did it only apply to the early Church, when the “sign gifts” were still in operation? Does this promise of healing apply for every illness, or does it apply only to sickness associated with God's discipline of the believer?

Let's make a few general comments on what the Bible teaches about sickness and healing. First of all, sickness and death are the result of sin. If sin had never entered the world, there would be no sickness. So in a general way, all sickness is the result of sin. In some cases, however, sickness is the direct result of a specific sin in the believer's life. In 1 Corinthians 11:30 we read that some of the Christians in Corinth were sick because of a specific sin in reference to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and some of them had even died. This is called “disciplinary sickness.”

Don't jump to the conclusion, which some Christians have wrongly done, that every time a Christian becomes sick, the illness is disciplinary sickness. No way! Sometimes Christians just get sick from a virus or are injured by an accident! There are many Biblical examples of individuals who were sick or disabled, and it had nothing to do with a specific sin in their lives. Remember the blind man in John 9? The Lord said that he was not blind because he had sinned, or because a specific sin of his parents. He was born blind so the works of God might be seen in his life!

Now what about healing? Does God heal people today? Of course He does. Usually God uses natural means for healing today. Medical doctors can prescribe medicines or do surgery so that the human body, which God has

marvelously designed, can do its natural work of healing. The medicinal use of wine is advised by the apostle Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:23, *“Use a little wine for your stomachs’ sake, and for your frequent ailments.”* Here the Bible teaches that medication can be used for healing the body.

But God can heal supernaturally as well, both then and today. When I was 12 years old, I was healed of polio, a viral illness that is not cured by antibiotics. Many believers were praying for me, but no “healer” was involved. The paralysis left overnight! I believe the Lord healed me supernaturally.

That brings up the question of whether there are “healers” and the “gift of healing” today. There is no doubt that the gift of healing and other sign gifts were present in the early Church -- no doubt about it! Many Christians believe that these sign gifts still exist today. However, there are some good biblical reasons to believe that God gave the “sign gifts” primarily for the apostolic period of the early Church, for the purpose of confirming the Word of the Lord through the apostles before the Scripture was completed.

So, in summary for today: healing, yes, but “healers” and the “gift of healing,” not conclusive. Question mark. In fact, I’d be very cautious about going to so-called “healers,” because there are occult healings taking place around the world today. For example, shamans or “witch doctors” in pagan cultures have certain healing powers -- but what is the source of their power? Their power source is not from God! “Healers” in our country may also tap into this satanic power source - - so be warned, and be very careful. And a lot more we could say!

Doctrinal Points

1. Prayers for the sick are answered.

Verse 15: *“...and the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise him up.”* Does this verse mean that if you pray for healing, and the sick person is not healed, then you and the sick person didn’t have enough faith? Is that what this verse means? No! There are numerous Biblical examples when people prayed with great faith, but they were not healed. It’s not God’s will to heal in every case.

The apostle Paul, who actually had the gift of healing, said, *“I left Trophimus sick in Miletus...”* (2 Timothy 4:20). And Paul himself was not healed of his “thorn in the flesh,” even though he prayed in faith, earnestly, three times, that the Lord would remove it. The Lord’s answer to Paul was, *“My grace is sufficient for you,”* (2 Corinthians 12). So it’s not God’s will to heal in every case. In fact, there is a time to die (see Psalm 139:16).

I believe that the sickness mentioned here in James 5 is “disciplinary sickness” -- that is, sickness as discipline for sin. Look at the context: *“...and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven”* (v15). And verse 16, *“Confess your trespasses to one another. Pray for one another that you may be healed.”* In addition, the examples of Elijah’s prayers about the

rain (v17-18) refer to God's discipline on Israel for their sins in Elijah's time. So I believe it is disciplinary sickness that is primarily in view in James 5.

Disciplinary sickness is like a "Time Out" from the Lord, when God puts the sinning believer on a bed of illness or injury so that he or she will look up! If God disciplines a believer with sickness, and if that believer recognizes and repents, he or she may call the elders of the church and confess the sin (or sins). Now notice the "if" at the end of verse 15. If this indeed is a case of disciplinary sickness, and the sinning believer repents and confesses the sin(s), then these sins will be forgiven. God will answer the prayer of faith of the elders, and the person will be healed, physically and/or spiritually.

The use of anointing oil, as a symbol of healing or of the Holy Spirit, is just as valid today as it was in the 1st century. Furthermore, it's never wrong to call the elders of the church to pray with you if God has allowed you to become ill, whether it's disciplinary sickness or not. God **does** answer prayer -- and that includes prayers for the sick.

2. Prayers of the righteous are effective.

"The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (v16). Our illustration here is the prophet Elijah. He was a righteous man who prayed that it would not rain in Israel, and it did not rain for 3½ years. Then he prayed again, this time for the rain to return, and it rained! Read 1 Kings 17 and 18 and you'll get the entire account. Why were Elijah's prayers answered? God answered Elijah because he was a righteous man, and he prayed in faith. And that's the point here.

When we say that Elijah prayed in faith, we mean that **his prayers were based on the revealed Word of God**. Elijah trusted the revealed Word of God, and he prayed on that basis. God had said that if Israel did not follow His laws, then He would not bless the land with rain and productivity. (Read Deuteronomy 28-29 for the blessings and cursings under the Mosaic Law.) Elijah prayed that the rain would cease on the basis of the revealed Word of God – that there would be no rain until the people of Israel got their act together and got rid of the false prophets of Baal. Then, based on the Word of God, he prayed again after the false prophets had been destroyed, and the rain and productivity of the land returned.

It's not the **amount** of Elijah's faith that's in view here. After all, verse 18 says, *"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours."* He was just an ordinary man. But Elijah was a **righteous** man, and he prayed **earnestly**, and his prayers were **based on the Word of God**. And God answered!

The prayers of righteous believers are effective. We too, can see our prayers answered if we live righteously and if we base our prayers on the revealed Word of God. I'm so encouraged when godly people tell me that they're praying for me and for the ministries that the Lord has given me, because I know the prayers of the righteous are effective.

God loves to answer your prayers, when they're based on His Word and when you're seeking to live a righteous life. Your prayers for the spiritual welfare of your family. Your prayers for opportunities to witness and serve the Lord. Your prayers

for the salvation of family and friends and neighbors and colleagues. I challenge you to pray this week for a specific opportunity to share the gospel with a specific individual that you know. I challenge you to do that -- and watch God work! He loves to answer that kind of prayer! And remember to live righteously. The prayers of the righteous are effective!

Practical Application

Let's "save souls" and "cover sins!"

Verses 19-20 - *"Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone 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 cover a multitude of sins."*

Notice that these verses are specifically addressed to believers -- to "brethren" (v19). So the "saving of souls" and the "covering of sins" mentioned here are not referring to eternal salvation. The context is the discipline of the wayward believer. If we pray earnestly for fellow believers who have wandered from the truth, and we reach out to them and love them back into the fellowship, then we "save their souls" from disciplinary sickness which can even lead to death. In addition, we will "cover" or "draw a veil over" a lot of ugly sin that would be exposed if they continued on in their sinful ways. For example, a young man gave his testimony at this church last week, and he shared how a number of you "prayed him back into the fellowship"! As a result, your love and prayers "covered a multitude of sins."

Prayer is a great ministry! Let's save souls and cover sins!