

Does Prayer + Oil = Healing?

Endurance-Part IV

James 5:13-16

A couple of sermons ago I made a reference to Joni Eareckson Tada, who as a 17 year old dove into the Chesapeake Bay at a place where the water was shallow – and they didn't know it.

She struck the bottom with her head and the impact left her paralyzed in fact she would have drowned had her sister not pulled her out of the lake that afternoon.

Joni was strong, athletic, and optimistic as a Christian; in fact, from reading passages in her Bible she became convinced that God's word promised healing. Based in part on a text of scripture, we're about to study, she was convinced that God would heal her spine and miraculously put her up on her feet.

So she brought together a group of friends and church leaders and set up a private healing service. The week before that service, she publicly confessed her faith by telling people, "Watch for me standing on your doorstep soon; I'm going to be healed." On the scheduled day the group met with her in her home . . . read the Word, anointed her with oil and prayed in fervent faith.¹

Nothing happened . . . eventually everyone went home.

Joni would enter a dark valley of disillusionment and doubt – a valley traveled by thousands of Christians before her and since.

Had she missed some clue? Had she prayed the right formula? Was she deprived of her miracle because she didn't have enough faith? Was there unconfessed sin? Did those who prayed over her have what it took . . . was it enough oil, or the right kind? Maybe it needed to be oil from the holy land . . . and on and on and on.

It would take some time before she surfaced spiritually with a better understanding of God's sovereignty and God's word.

Can God miraculously heal people today? Absolutely! Could He have healed her then and there? Without a doubt.

God can do whatever God wants to do, but is there some formula we can follow that guarantees it every time? Is there some verse that God will heal through those who are spiritually superior; is there a text that guarantees that those with enough faith can receive the miracles of God whenever they ask?

I am about to read a verse or two right out of the Bible used by religious leaders, denominations, movements, protestant healers, televangelists and Catholic priests to prove all the above and more.

I'm going to read a text used by Catholic and Protestant leaders to create a hierarchy of spiritual power held only in the hand of the clergy; I'm gonna read a text of scripture that supports the mystical power of oil in anointing the sick; a text used to support the Charismatic's view of prosperity theology and the prayer of faith.

I'm about to read a verse or two that has been used to support the incantational use of the name 'Jesus' in praying for miracles . . . in fact, I am going to give you some verses right out of scripture that guarantee physical healing whenever you are sick.

Are you ready for these verses? Get your pencil out and your highlighter . . . this is the formula you have been waiting for.

James chapter 5, beginning at verse 13. The text reads; ***Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Then he must***

call for the elders of the church and they are to 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 healed.

Now immediately, you are struck with a number of questions, aren't you?

- what do the elders of the church have to do with sickness and healing;
- is there a third, missing role among spiritual leaders; is it supposed to include the ministry of the word, prayer and healing;
- why is oil a part of the process;
- does this prayer of faith always restore the one who is sick;
- and what does confessing sin have to do with the process;
- what kind of sicknesses here are being healedⁱⁱ

Those are great questions. Let's start at the beginning and untangle it from what we might like it to mean.

What's missed in all of this is the primary issue of prayer. In fact, you ought to underline the word 'pray or prayer' it appears in every verse we just read. That's the issue.

What's also missed is the context. James isn't writing to tell Christians how to get out of trials. He's writing to tell Christians how to deal with them.

How to endure . . . and the heart of endurance is prayer.ⁱⁱⁱ

You might think of endurance as the automobile and prayer as the engine that makes it work.

Therefore, James writes in verse 7, be patient until the coming of the Lord . . . be patient (verse 8); strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near . . . verse 11, we count those as blessed who endured.

Now here in *verse 13* he adds to his list of imperatives and this time he commands the believer to pray about everything.

So, let's start again at *verse 13* and work our way through this often misused, certainly confusing text to our 21st century ears.

As we work our way through this paragraph, there are three commands from James that will help guide our study.

The first command James delivers to us is this:

1. Pray when you are overwhelmed with emotion.

Beginning in *verse 13*, James writes, ***Is anyone among you suffering?*** (Here's the imperative), ***Then he must pray.***

The truth is, we as Christians love to talk about prayer; we love to hear people talk about answered prayer; we thrill to the stories of great Christians from the past who had unbelievable prayer lives and saw God do wonderful things. We love everything about prayer except the actual discipline of prayer.^{iv}

One author did a survey and found that the average Christian prays anywhere from 3-5 minutes a day [compare that to 3-5 hours of television or radio or texting a day]. He went on to write, compare the time you spend complaining to the time you spend praying; compare the time you spend talking to people about other people to the time you spend talking to God about people and you'll have an idea [how prepared you are to endure the troubles of life].^v

James effectively writes here, "Are you having trouble in life?" Then who are you talking to about it? Have you talked to God?

The word for *suffering* here in *verse 13* refers to experiencing misfortune or to suffer some kind of calamity or hardship. The trouble can be physical, mental, emotional, personal or financial.^{vi} Whatever you are suffering, pray about it; and James isn't giving trite advice, by the way.

He knows he's writing to Jewish believers, many of whom have lost everything in their exile from Rome.

They were in church, involved in the assembly, listening to the letter by the Apostle James read in the assembly; no doubt they had a prayer list going around the fellowship—the question still was are you personally praying about your situation?

During times like these when overwhelmed by the emotion of misfortune, James writes, don't just talk about prayer—don't just go to a meeting for prayer—don't just hang around people who pray—make sure *you* pray.

The tense of the verb means to pray continually. You are literally continually conversing with God about your struggle.^{vii} When in pain . . . pray.

Then James flips the emotional coin over and writes next in *verse 13*, ***"Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises."***

James is describing the opposite extreme of emotion. ***Is anyone cheerful?***

That word has to do with being filled with courage or being in good spirits. The only other time this word appears in the New Testament it's where Paul is trying to cheer up his traveling companions on a boat that was about to become shipwrecked.^{viii}

It's not a word that refers to silliness or shallow hilarity, but an inner attitude of cheerfulness.^{ix}

James is saying, when that emotion is experienced, don't forget to sing praise to God. It's actually a command in the imperative—sing (exclamation point)!

Thomas Manton the Puritan wrote in the 17th century, “we wanted mercy from God in the morning, but we usually forget to sing praises to God in the evening.”^x

If you're in trouble pray to your Lord. If you're happy sing praise to your Lord.

What James does here is provide a contrast that allows for every possible emotion. From deep sorrow to great elation; in other words, talk to God about every emotion you feel.

In fact, one Greek scholar believes the commands to pray and sing can be transposed so that if you're happy, pray and if you're suffering, sing.^{xi}

Which is exactly what Paul and Silas did when they were overwhelmed in their captivity their feet in stocks in prison and they began to what? Sing.

Jesus Christ did the same with His disciples before entering the most painful epoch in human history the crucifixion.

Matthew writes that they sang a hymn together before leaving the upper room that night. (Matthew 26:30).

To this day, the Bride of Christ is marked by composing and singing praise to God.

Go all the way back 1900 years ago to Pliny, a Roman governor, who wrote to the Roman Emperor, Trajan, telling him of these Christians who “are in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it is light, when they sing hymns to Christ as God.”^{xii}

By the way, a man told me just recently that one of the things that marked him when he visited this church—the first Protestant church he'd ever visited was the enthusiastic singing of the people around him.

You're probably thinking, “He must not have been sitting in my section.” (it must not have been at 8:00 o'clock)

He might have been . . . and compared to all he'd ever known, it was remarkable to be in a place that was to him alive with joyful singing.

That just struck him and I have heard that often over the years, by the way.

Singing is not a prelude to what matters when I finally get up here. Singing matters period.

In fact, it is one of the imperatives, one of the exclamation points in this letter from James, along with prayer.

Listen, we are enduring life together, right? Some in here today are in the valley and some are on the heights.

So is it any wonder that when we meet we find fellowship with one another and the encouragement of our faith by praying and singing to Christ, who is the true and living God.

What we do collectively we should do individually and that's James point.

Whether you are trudging uphill in your spiritual walk or coasting downhill and you feel the refreshing breeze in your hair or on the sides of your head, not matter which one you are now walking James wants you and me to be consciously relating it all to Christ, and we do that by praying to Him and praising Him.

When you're in the car or in the kitchen and you are overflowing with emotion either bad or good interrupt it with either praying or singing and sometimes both.

Pray when you are overflowing with emotion. Secondly, James will further command us to:

2. Pray when you are overcome with weakness

Notice verse 14. Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to 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 . . .

Now stop for a moment. Two times you read the word, translated, “sick”; once in **verse 14** and once in **verse 15**.

The word translated ‘sick’ in **verse 14** is the Greek word, *astheneo* (ασθενεω) which primarily refers to weakness or feebleness.^{xiii}

In fact, in all but three of its appearances in the New Testament, it never refers to physical sickness but spiritual weakness.

- Paul uses it to refer to the immature believer who is weak in his faith – he uses the same word in **Romans 14:1** that James uses here;

- He uses it again in *I Corinthians 8 and verse 9* to refer to the young and immature Christian who might stumble into sin because of the liberty exercised by a more mature believer. So Paul encourages the more mature believer to be careful for the sake of the weak ones – same word.
- Paul even used the word in *Romans 5* to refer to our former, unbelieving state before coming to faith in Christ. He wrote in *verse 6, For while we were still helpless . . . Christ died for the ungodly.*

The primary meaning of *astheneo* is spiritual weakness or spiritual inability. And this is the word used by James here in *verse 14 of chapter 5*.

I recommend you clear up a tremendous amount of confusion by simply writing into the margin of your translation, next to the word, “*sick*”, the word, *weak* – or, if you have room the words, “spiritually weak.”

This is why it you are to call the elders. You don’t call the elders when you’re physically sick to come heal you . . . at least I hope not. I can’t do anything for you? I can take your temperature. I can give you some aspirin.

If you throw up in front of me, I promise you I’ll do the same. I can join you in your sickness.

James is saying to call the elders when you are spiritually weak.

In fact, if you look down at *verse 15* and notice the word translated “*sick*” again.

This is actually a different Greek word from *verse 14*; however, it is very similar and even more instructive. This word never refers to physical sickness. It refers to fatigue, weariness which may very well lead to sickness.

You could write into the margin next to the word translated “*sick*” in *verse 15*, the word, *weary*.

This particular word is only used one other time in the entire New Testament and that text is Hebrews 12.

The writer of Hebrews is encouraging his readers to run with endurance the race that is set before them, in other words, it’s the same context as James—endurance.

Hebrews 12 and verse 3 says, “For consider Him—Christ—who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

So that you will not grow weary—the same word used by James in *chapter 5 and verse 15* unfortunately translated, “*sick*”.

James is telling the spiritually weak and weary to call for the elders.

Which, by the way informs you immediately that this doesn’t fit the culture of the modern healing services or faith healers who would use this text to support their crusades, this isn’t a public healing service or even a healing service at church; it’s a private prayer meeting in the home of the weary one.

Did you notice that this does not include spiritual leaders outside the church, but spiritual leaders over the church to which this weak and weary one belongs. These are the elders of the local assembly.

Now notice again *verse 14* for some more surprises. *Is anyone among you weak? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil.*

What’s going on now? Well, let me tell you what isn’t going on and we’ll eventually get around to what is.

First, this is not support for the Roman Catholic sacrament of extreme unction. They view this particular text as support for anointing someone with holy oil who is about to die.

Supposedly the sins committed in the latter years of this person’s life will be forgiven.

The oil has to be prepared and administered by a priest, with so many breathings on it; supposedly enchanted by so many words; the parts of the body anointed are the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, feet, and with women, the naval. And the priest will intone something along the lines of, “By this holy oil, and his tender mercy, God forgive you whatever you have sinned by sight, hearing, smell and touch.”^{xiv}

Listen, the simplest reading of this text is really clear that this anointing has something to do with health, not death.

This isn’t for the dying, this is for the living.

And holy oil is not needed to forgive you of your last sins before you die in order to avoid the more painful part of purgatory. Christ has already suffered in your place, as a believer.

The particular sins we deal with each day are dealt with and confessed so that we can enjoy unhindered fellowship with Christ and His church not to try and avoid punishment in the flames of torment. We have been saved from Hell forever by Christ alone.

The sacrament of extreme unction is really nothing more than job security for the priest who has

to be the one to administer the oil to the dying person who hopes to cut his years in purgatory short.

Friends, this text isn't justification for some special sacrament of holy oil that forgives sins before someone dies.

This text isn't about death, it's about health.

Furthermore, this text doesn't give olive oil some kind of mystical or magical power that guarantees healing.

The Protestants need to take note of that one and a few other myths associated with things from Israel especially the televangelist who sells little bottles of sacred water from the Jordan River, capable of giving you spiritual power on sale for 19.99 . . . while supplies last.

He got it out of his kitchen sink. It's not from the Jordan River. He's lying to you. And if he isn't lying to you and he really got it out of the Jordan River then he stole it and illegally transported it back to the states.

So he's either a liar or a thief. He needs that holy water for himself.

Even still, the water from the Jordan is not mystically capable of giving you some kind of spiritual power.

There's an ancient Hebrew word for all of that—its pronounced ba-lo-ney.

Which leads us all to the question at hand: if this oil isn't a sacrament or some special potent, why is it a part of the elder's treatment of the weak and weary believer.

The Jews would have immediately understood James words to refer to the soothing massage of olive oil to encourage the weary and the fatigued.

James is not referring to a little dab of olive oil on the forehead.

The participle James uses here means that the person's body is to be rubbed with oil.^{xv}

We have historical accounts of this occurring where family members would do the rub down or women that accompanied the elders would do this for weak and weary women in the assembly.

The word translated "anointing" in *verse 14* is again confusing. It makes this sound like some kind of special ceremony or some kind of unique anointing with oil.

Spiros Zodhiates, a Greek scholar raised on the Island of Crete knew from experience this custom was still used in the early 1900's as he grew up. It was used for both physically and emotionally weary people in fact, no matter what problem you had, your

treatment typically included a rub down with olive oil.^{xvi}

Herod the Great bathed in a vessel full of olive oil to give him strength; Celsus recommended rubbing oil in the case of fevers and other ailments.^{xvii}

Even today, people pay a lot of money for trips to the spa.

James reference to a full body rub down with olive oil was only a part of this setting. There is little doubt that the best of medicine was applied in this primitive setting to the weak and the weary, but that wasn't the primary issue.

Otherwise, the elders could have sent a group of women or other men from the church to this person's home, but he called for the elders.

Why, because the primary issue was one of sin.

In other words, this person who was spiritually weak and fatigued was in that physical state because of unrepentant sin.

The physical issues were secondary. Restoration and reconciliation were the primary issues in this person's life who had more than likely been disciplined from the church.

So he now desires to repent and he calls for the elders of the church to come to him. Now weary from his disobedience, he is now at the end of himself, besieged by guilt and sorrow, spiritual weakness and fatigue.

Like David the Psalmist who wrote of his unrepentant life, "*When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away; through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. (Psalm 32:3-4)*

These are the physical effects of nothing less than hypocrisy and hidden sin.

This kind of scene is taking place in James chapter 5. A man who is worn out by his unrepentant sin has called for the elders.

And notice what happens *verse 14*. Look again *the elders are to pray over him, anointing him with oil—now notice, in the name of the Lord.*

That little phrase has created all sorts of superstitions. Just use the name, 'Jesus' and say it a dozen times and you'll be healed, protected, cured, whatever.

Listen, to pray in the name of Jesus Christ means that you are praying in agreement with everything that the name of Christ represents.

Just saying "Jesus" over and over again isn't some kind of special incantation. His name represents His

character and His attributes. To invoke His name means to acknowledge everything He was and is.

You are surrendered to the totality of His revelation as high priest, mediator, prophet, redeemer, savior, God-incarnate.^{xviii}

Furthermore, to pray in the name of Jesus means to pray according to His will.

To end a prayer by saying, "In Jesus name" means you are submitting whatever it is you prayed to the will of Christ.

And since we do not know the will of Christ, we are surrendering even our expectations of what we think He will do to what He chooses to do. And with that we are satisfied.

This isn't a special formula . . . there are no special incantations; there aren't even special postures of prayer that are more effective than others.

Church history is filled with debates over things like that too.

In fact, I clipped a poem some time ago from Israel My Glory, the magazine published by Friends of Israel. It dealt with this debate about posture and prayer . . . with some excellent humor.

The poem is entitled, "The Prayer of Cyrus Brown" written by Sam Ross who was born in 1858 . . . here it goes;

"The proper way for a man to pray,"

Said Deacon Lemuel Keyes,

"And the only proper attitude

Is down upon his knees."

"No, I should say the way to pray,

Said Rev. Doctor Wise,

"Is standing straight with outstretched arms

And rapt and upturned eyes."

"Oh, no; no, no," said Elder Slow,

"Such posture is too proud;

A man should pray with eyes fast closed

And head contritely bowed."

"It seems to me his hands should be

Austerely clasped in front,

With both thumbs pointing toward the ground,"

Said Rev. Doctor Blunt.

"Las' year I fell in Hodgkin's well

Head first," said Cyrus Brown,

"With both my heels a-stickin' up,

My head a-pointing down;

An' I made a prayer right then an' there-

Best prayer I ever said,

The prayingest prayer I ever prayed,

A-standin' on my head."^{xix}

Frankly, it doesn't matter how you pray – what matters is *that* you pray.

Pray when you are overflowing with emotion.

Pray when you are overcome with weakness

Now, thirdly;

3. Pray when you are overpowered by sin

Notice *verse 15*. ***And the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is weary and the Lord will raise him up.***

There isn't any doubt that this weak and weary believer is praying along, but would you notice that the prayer of faith isn't prayed by the sick person, but the elder.

It isn't the strength of the faith of the weary believer, but the strength of the faith of the spiritual leader.

Translate that into the modern healing movement. If a person doesn't get healed in a crusade or healing service, their faith is immediately in question. They evidently needed more faith.

Joni Erickson Tada, now in her early 60's, serving Christ faithfully from her wheel chair, boldly confronted the health and wealth world on a talk radio show some time ago when she said, and I quote, "Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin or Benny Hinn have never called me and asked me to come on their program." I can only imagine why.

She went on to describe when she was younger, believing that God still wanted her to be healed she had her sister drive her to the Washington DC arena where Kathryn Kuhlman was holding a healing service. The arena was packed and Joni said there were 35 or so of us in wheelchairs waiting for the stadium elevator to take us down. During the service we sat there with baited breath . . . but nothing happened. It was devastating.

She said she could remember all of them being ushered out early by the ushers and there they sat, waiting for the stadium elevator to take them back up to the parking lot, many of them no doubt wondering if the problem was their own lack of faith.

James would say to the healers of our day, "Not only are you misinterpreting my letter, even if I was talking about healing sickness in general, the question of having enough faith is not in the sick person, but in you."

Would you notice the guarantee of restoration here in this text?

Verse 15 again, and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick/weary and the Lord will raise him up.

Not might raise him up . . . maybe raise him up but will raise him up—guaranteed.

So, if this passage is referring to physical healing, every time a believer gets sick, all we have to do is invite the elders to come over with some olive oil and you can expect healing.^{xx}

The truth is, even the Apostle Paul left several of his co-workers sick, one of them close to death. If all it took was a prayer and a little dab of oil then why withhold that from them?

The key phrase comes next in ***verse 15 –if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.***

That little word, “if” at the beginning of the phrase, is loaded with meaning. The English language if might mean, maybe, possibly, certainly, probably. You really don’t know unless you can read their body language or see them nod their head.

In the Greek language it’s clearly stated in writing. There are four classes or conditions behind the little word if and you can always know what it means by its construction.

I won’t bore you with all the conditions, but the condition James uses is the third-class which is where most of us sit on an airplane. Third class means, “more than likely.”^{xxi}

James is saying, If he has committed sins and more than likely he has, they will be forgiven.

In other words, weariness and weakness may not always be the result of sin, but James writes, in this case, more than likely it was.

In fact, the verb translated here, “he has sinned” actually refers to a condition where the sinning

believer is now abiding under the consequences of his sins in the past.^{xxii}

In other words, his sins have finally caught up with him.

Either he was unrepentant and, as many commentators believe, disciplined from the assembly and therefore called the elders to come to him; or he kept his sins a secret and they finally wore him down and he wanted to clear his conscience.

Either way, he has called the elders to join him as he seeks to be reconciled to their authority. They will pray for him as he seeks to be reconciled to his church and ultimately to his Lord.

The elders come and apply the best of medicine for his body that has suffered because of his sin and they pray for his spiritual restoration and guess what—guess what—every time someone does that. . . every time someone repents of that sin which has overpowered him, he’s coming clean; he’s coming home, and every time a prodigal returns home—every time—every time, the Lord will restore him. Guaranteed!

The word James uses for “restored” in ***verse 15*** is a word that means revived, literally aroused and awakened.^{xxiii}

Repentance leads to revival . . . every time. So pray:

- 1. Pray when you are overflowing with emotion.**
 - 2. Pray when you are overcome with weakness**
 - 3. Pray when you are overpowered by sin**
- And you will be revived . . . guaranteed!

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