

James 5:14-15 - The Prayer of Faith that Heals - Part 2

Sign Title: The Prayer of Faith that Heals

October 30, 2011

Good morning Faith family. Next week, we finish our series in James. Today, we are back to a very perplexing statement in verse 15. We finished last week's message by reading it; this week we will study it. Let's read verses 14 and 15 before we study them.

James 5:14-15

Last week, we learned what to do when life is good. We sing songs of praise. We also learned what to do when life isn't so good. When we have troubles of *any* kind, we are to pray. In verse 14, we looked at a specific kind of trouble, serious physical illnesses. That is a time when we call the elders of the church, they anoint us with oil and pray over us. There was a lot of information in that message about how and why this is done. Because of time constraints, I didn't get a chance to finish it. If you want the rest of the story or you missed the message, I recommend you to the www.christ2rculture.com website to read the notes for the message.

Last week, we ended by asking, but not answering, what it means when James says in verse 15, "...the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up."

At first glance, this seems straight forward. If someone is sick, you get the elders to pray for them and God will raise them up. End of story. Unfortunately, this creates a real dilemma.

Just like me, many of you have friends or loved ones that were diagnosed with a serious disease. Powerful prayer was mobilized for them. With all the faith that could be mustered, this verse was claimed and believed, but they didn't get better. Instead of being healed, they died. It looks like this verse is clearly wrong. How should we handle it? Here are some options people have taken:

1. Blame God for not keeping his promise to heal. (God failed.)
2. Erode your confidence in God's Word because it appears to make promises that are not true. (The Bible failed.)
3. Blame yourself and believe the reason your friend or loved one wasn't healed is because you didn't have enough faith when you prayed. (I failed.)
4. Blame the one who was sick for not having enough faith to be healed. (The one who was sick failed.)

Of course, all of us have seen the fruitcakes on television who say that if there is no healing in your life it is the fault of the one who is sick for lacking the faith to be healed. Of course these fruitcake faith healers eventually die themselves and prove their own words wrong. But while they are alive, they cause many people needless pain with their false teaching. Which of these four options should we take when it comes to understanding the disconnect between faith and life in James 5:15? None of them are right. To explain the right way to understand this verse, I want to begin by laying a proper biblical grounding for understanding the role of sickness in our life. Once that is done, we will return to the verse and look at it with fresh understanding.

It is not always God's will to heal.

In 2 Timothy 4:20, we find Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus; why didn't Paul just pray for him, anoint him with oil and heal him? In 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, we discover that while Paul had the gift of healing, he prayed three times for his own healing, and it was not granted. Does this mean Paul didn't pray with enough faith? We shouldn't neglect the obvious. Have you noticed everyone eventually dies? If James 5:15 was an unqualified statement, we should expect some really old Christians around the church. Every time they were sick, they would simply call the elders to pray over them and they would be healed. I don't think we can look at this passage and say it is God's will to heal everyone all the time when the elders pray for them.

Sometimes sickness is caused by sin.

And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. James 5:15 (ESV)

We see in verse 15 that sometimes there is a connection between sickness and sin. When there is sin in our life, God may choose to bring sickness as a form of discipline for refusal to repent of particular repetitive and willful sins. Let's look at 1 Corinthians 11:27-30 and see this in action.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. 1 Corinthians 11:27-30 (ESV)

The Corinthian church had all kinds of problems. One of them was Christians partaking of the Lord's Table while harboring sin in their hearts. The

Lord's Table celebrates the story of the gospel. Jesus died in my place for my sin. When I participate in a celebration of repentance, forgiveness, mercy and grace but intentionally relish sin in my heart, don't forgive others and repent of my sin, it is a kind of gospel blasphemy. We are to examine ourselves and put our sins before the Lord. We are to open our hearts, confess our sins and strive for our lives be an extension of the forgiveness, mercy and grace we receive from Christ. A refusal to do this on some of the Corinthians part led to sickness, illness and even death.

This is not just a New Testament thing. God punished many in the Old Testament with sickness as a form of discipline for their sin. Gehazzi, Elijah's servant, contracted leprosy as discipline for his sin against God. King Uzziah was also given leprosy because of his sin.

It is not hard to know why God uses sickness as a form of spiritual discipline. Nothing gets our attention quicker than when we don't feel well. What we must remember is that *if sin is the cause, confession is the cure*. But let's be careful here. It is easy to adopt an over-simplistic view that all sickness is the result of sin.

Sickness is not always caused by sin.

The Bible teaches that many times sickness is not God's discipline for sin. The great example of this is Job. The reason his children died and his life fell apart was not because of his sinfulness but because of his righteousness. His sickness was a test of his faith. His sickness was not an act of discipline but a trial to demonstrate his righteousness.

This is something Job's friends had a hard time understanding. They were convinced the reason his world fell apart was because he had hidden unconfessed sins. Look what Eliphaz, one of his friends, tells him.

Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. Job 4:7–9 (ESV)

Job's friends had an over-simplistic view of sickness that would have resonated well with some television preachers. Unfortunately, it was just dead wrong.

Another great example of the disconnection between sickness and sin is seen in John 9.

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." John 9:1–3 (ESV)

First of all, this man's sickness was not as a result of sin, just like we saw with Job. Why was this man suffering with blindness? It was "that the works of God might be displayed in him."

Sickness and death are for God's glory.

While sickness and death are a result of sin entering this world, they are also an instrument God uses to bring us to spiritual maturity and to wean us off the things of this world to focus our joy on Christ. Sickness also makes us realize how quickly life passes. Sickness cultivates within us an appetite to live for the things of eternity. If you are sick this morning, you need to embrace this part of your sickness and let it be used by God to draw you to think about and

live for Jesus. In that way, illness is used by God to be spiritually profitable for us.

One of the men I look up to is John Piper. A few years back, John was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He underwent treatment and is doing well today. When he was in the midst of that illness, he wrote an article called “Don’t waste your cancer” and he made 10 points in it. I want to share them with you this morning.

1. You will waste your cancer if you do not believe it is designed for you by God.
2. You will waste your cancer if you believe it is a curse and not a gift.
3. You will waste your cancer if you seek comfort from your odds rather than from God.
4. You will waste your cancer if you refuse to think about death.
5. You will waste your cancer if you think that beating cancer means staying alive rather than cherishing Christ.
6. You will waste your cancer if you spend too much time reading about cancer and not enough time reading about God.
7. You will waste your cancer if you let it drive you into solitude instead of deepening your relationships with manifest affection.
8. You will waste your cancer if you grieve as those who have no hope.
9. You will waste your cancer if you treat sin as casually as before.
10. You will waste your cancer if you fail to use it as a means of witness to the truth and glory of Christ.¹

¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/dont-waste-your-cancer>

Behind all of these points is the truth of John 9. What is happening to me in my sickness is so the works of God can be displayed in my life. God is working in our lives through the disease and through the cancer and through the heart attack and through the backache and through the MS and through everything else that isn't the way it's supposed to be to do something in me and through me that is more important than me being healthy. He is teaching me the brevity of life. He is helping me think rightly about how to spend my days. He is teaching me to treasure Christ above anything else. He is weaning me away from dreaming about health and wholeness now and building within me an appetite for a much greater health and wholeness that will be mine for all eternity when I am with Christ.

You know how this works. You are feeling good then something hits you. It could be a toothache, flu, stomach cramps or an allergic reaction to gluten. When it hits, you are just destroyed. You can't wait to feel better. While you are feeling sick, you really miss feeling good. The longer and darker the illness, the more you wish you were feeling good again.

In God's plan, he uses illnesses and even the process of dying, to build in us an appetite for how great we will finally feel when we are with him. One of the first things we will say in eternity is, "It feels so good to feel good again!"

We must not waste the spiritual good God plans to do through physical weakness in our lives.

What does James mean when he talks about the prayer of faith that will make a sick person well?

We have only laid the groundwork for understanding verse 15. We still haven't answered the question where we began. What does James mean when he says, "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up..." Here are the options open to us:

1. The prayer of the elders will always heal.
2. It only applied to the time of the apostles, and God doesn't heal anymore.
3. The prayer of faith is a means to God healing when it is his will to do so.

The first option doesn't seem reasonable because, if it was true, Christians would be the oldest people on the planet. The second option also doesn't seem likely. It doesn't mention the apostles. It says elders, which is a continuing office in the church. Nowhere in the Bible does it say to no longer pray for healing once the time of the apostles has passed. This leaves us with the third option. Praying in faith is a means to God healing if it is his will to do so.

Should we have faith in God's ability to heal? Yes! Faith believes in the power of God to heal. We should affirm that in our hearts as we pray. God may choose to heal either directly or through secondary causes, like we learned last week. The answer to someone's healing is not dependent on us drumming up enough faith. The question is God's will in the matter and whether our prayer for their healing is in accordance with God's will for how they are to glorify him. We should pray for healing but always submit our prayers to God's will. Jesus modeled this as he prayed on the Mount of Olives.

...saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." Luke 22:42 (ESV)

Friends, it was not the father's will for Jesus to be released from the cross. It was through Christ's death that God brought us full and complete salvation and ultimately the promise of our resurrection. Jesus' dying brought God more glory than Jesus' living. Realize there will come a time just like that for each one of us. God will use our dying as a greater way to bring him glory than our living.

The bottom line in all this is the eternal purposes of God. All prayer has the power to accomplish what it requests by being the means by which God ordained his purposes to be accomplished. This is a mind bender and one we cannot totally understand.

God says that prayer is very powerful. It will change things. James makes that point with the example of Elijah and the weather, an example we will study next week. Prayer really does change things because God hears our prayers and loves to respond to them. Did God decide before we prayed what he would do? Are his eternal purposes preset? Yes, they are. However, doesn't that also allow God to decide to do what he has already decided to do as the response to the prayers of his people that he already ordained would happen? Yes! There is a mystery on how this works. Our choices are real. Our prayers are effective, but God is sovereign over it all.

James doesn't want this mystery to demotivate us in prayer. His whole point is that he wants us to be extra-motivated in prayer because we know God chooses to respond to the prayers of his people. Even the curing of serious sickness is not beyond God's ability to respond to our prayers.

Who does the healing? *The Lord will raise him up.* God does the healing. What was the means to the healing? The prayer of faith. What means did God use to affect the healing? It could be either a direct act of God or he could choose to use secondary means, like chemo or antibiotics. Either way, he is the one who did it either supernaturally or providentially. In the end, who gets the glory for every healing? God does.

Let's not be the kind of silly Christians who tell God in our prayers what he must do. Let us tell him what we would like him to do but trust him enough to leave the results in his hands. When we talk to other people about praying for healing, let's not be the kind of silly Christians who tell people that we know for sure they will be healed or that it is always God's will for them to be healed. That is just untrue.

Stand on what we know for sure God promises he will do.

1. God promises to give us grace, help and the faith to persevere in our trials.
2. God promises to not give us more than we can handle, but many times he will take us to the edge.
3. God promises to give his Holy Spirit to comfort us in all our troubles.
4. God promises to bring glory to his name through our life, even if it is through terrible suffering, like Job experienced.
5. God promises we can trust how he responds to our prayers. If he chooses not to bring healing but allow death, we can still trust him.
6. God promises whatever he does with us is for his glory and our good, even in sickness.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (ESV)

Conclusion

As a child, Steve Saint thought of Timbuktu as a made-up name for the ends of the earth. In 1986, while traveling in Western Africa for Missionary Aviation Fellowship, he found himself stranded in the real Timbuktu. Steve tried to rent a truck and to travel elsewhere. In the process, he realized men with scimitars and knives were watching him suspiciously. Seeing their knives and sensing their murderous thoughts reminded him of his father, Nate Saint, a former missionary to Ecuador. When Steve was only 5, natives speared his father and four other missionaries. Now, 30 years later, Steve found himself wondering if he would be speared to death like his father.

Steve's attempt to rent a truck fell through, and he escaped the men who were watching him suspiciously. Not knowing what to do, he asked for directions to a church. Children led him to a tiny mud brick house with a poster on the wall showing wounded hands covering a cross. A dark-skinned man in robes approached him and introduced himself as Nouf Af Infa Yatara. Through a translator, Steve asked Nouf how he became a Christian.

Nouh told him he stole vegetables from a missionary's garden. He was caught, but the missionary promised him vegetables and an ink pen if he memorized some verses from the Bible. Nouh believed the verses and came to Christ. As a result, Nouh's parents threw him out of the home. They pulled him out of school. Nouh's own mother tried to poison him but he suffered no ill effects.

Steve asked Nouh where he found such courage to follow Christ even when his own family had turned against him. Nouh told him the missionary had given him books. His favorite book was the story of five young men who risked their lives to take God’s good news to Indians in the jungle of South America. In the book, it told how they let themselves be speared to death by the Indians even though they had guns and could have killed their attackers.

Steve was stunned. He told Nouh that one of those men was his father. Nouh was stunned, “Your father?” Nouh told Steve how God had used his father’s death as the inspiration to help a young Muslim-turned-Christian to hold onto his faith.

Steve realized that if God could plan and use the death of his own son, he could also plan and use the death of Steve’s dad, Nate Saint, to accomplish his sovereign purpose. It was a purpose which included reaching one young Muslim for Christ and orchestrating a God-ordained meeting of Steve with him at the end of the earth where he could peer behind the curtain of God’s sovereignty and catch a glimpse of God’s goodness in all things, even in the death of his saints.²



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² Randy Alcorn, *If God is Good*, pg. 400.

