



I'm Sick. Should I Call the Elders? (James 5:13-16)

By Keith Weeks

Have you followed James 5? Any Christian who has been sick for a while may at some point have found themselves being asked such a question. Or perhaps simply because they love God and love his Word, they've found themselves wrestling with a passage that seems to demand that those who are sick should ask the elders of their church to pray for them and anoint them with oil. Or maybe they have already asked the elders to do this only to find that the promise of healing, that seems to accompany the command, was not forthcoming. What are we to make of such things?

The first thing that needs to be said is that this passage:

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 of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.

is not as straightforward as it may initially appear. There is a translation issue that makes it a little more difficult to understand and apply than it probably should be.

Before James gives this particular directive, he gives two other directives which don't seem to be related. 'Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing.'

The first translation issue which has a bearing on our understanding of this text relates to the word translated 'cheerful'. The Greek word, that lies behind it, is used only two other times in the New Testament (Acts 27:22 & 25). The context there in Acts is notably also one of suffering. There it is translated as 'to take heart'. Paul's ship is caught in a storm and so he says 'I urge you to *take heart* for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.'

So, instead of reading, 'Is anyone *cheerful*?', it would probably be better to translate it in the same way as it appears in Acts, 'Is anyone taking heart?' or 'taking courage', 'Let him sing.' I suspect that translators have seen the command to sing and concluded that cheerfulness would make more sense. However, in Scripture and in the Christian life for that matter, it is not so uncommon for suffering to beget singing. Consider the Psalms. So many say much about suffering and were composed in the midst of trouble. Or consider Paul and Silas in prison. What did they do? They were praying and singing! (Acts 16:25)

James is not talking about different circumstances (suffering and times of happiness). He is saying, 'Here is what to do when you are in trouble. If you are suffering, pray. And, if you have the courage, sing!' And then James in his wisdom anticipates a pastoral difficulty. What if you are so sick or so weak that you cannot pray or sing?

Now here it should be noted that there is another slight translation issue with the word translated 'sick'. The Greek word behind this is certainly often used to mean precisely that, but there is an alternate translation that would also be consistent with the way this word is used in the New Testament. Instead of, 'Is anyone among you *sick*,' we could legitimately translate it, 'Is anyone among you *weak*?' While the Greek here is often used to refer to physical weakness (such as sickness), it is also used to denote spiritual weakness. It's the same word found in Romans 14:1 where it speaks of welcoming the one who is weak in faith. In other words, it is quite possible that James has more in view here than merely physical weakness.

So, a better translation would be, 'Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone taking heart? Let him sing.'

Is anyone among you weak? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord.'

This is not a command to sick Christians everywhere to call the elders to pray for them so that they would immediately be healed of their illnesses. That would contradict what occurs when Paul is afflicted and prays three times for healing only to receive the answer, 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' (2 Corinthians 12:8 & 9)

Paul's response is in fact no different to what James is pressing here. Are you suffering? Then pray (as Paul does). If you have the courage, sing (as Paul and Silas do). However, if you are so weak, either physically or spiritually that you are struggling to pray for yourself, then ask the elders of the church to come and help you. Why? because the crucial thing is not physical healing but the maintenance of our relationship with God.

Now this doesn't mean that physical healing is excluded by James. I think it is part of what he has in view, but it is probably not the main part. Notice also that there is no mention as to a time frame for this healing or raising up. God may bring healing immediately or he may wait for the resurrection.

So, if you are afflicted and you are reading James 5 and perhaps feeling guilty because it seems to say that sick people are obliged to call the elders to pray for them and to anoint them with oil, you don't need to feel that added burden. If you are able to pray for yourself, you are no more obliged than any other Christian

to ask for this. On the other hand, if you are struggling to pray, (perhaps you aren't even sick, but for any number of reasons you find yourself struggling to lift up your heart to God, to ask for help and forgiveness for any sins you may have committed) here is God's kind word to you. He says others can help you. Others can pray for you when you can't pray. Go ask the elders. They are put in that position because they are men who pray for the flock. That is their job. If they are good elders, they will be only too happy to do this for you.

Notice also that James goes on to say, this is something we should all be doing with each other. We should all pray for each other and we should all confess our sins to one another that we may be healed (vs 16). We all need the spiritual healing that only the grace of Christ can give and we all need each other's help in taking these things to God.

So, are you suffering? Pray. And if you have the courage to do so, sing! Sing psalms perhaps. Sing about suffering and sing about Christ's redeeming suffering and victory on your behalf. And if you can neither pray nor sing, don't despair. There is help at hand. Call the elders. And by the way, don't worry about any awkwardness you or they may have about the oil. Just let them do as best they can with that and let them pray for you. God is merciful. He not only hears our prayers but he hears the prayers of others for us when we ourselves are too weak to pray.

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