

## 31. Prayer in the Communion of Saints

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*Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.*

*(James 5:14-15)*

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### **Instantaneous Faith Healing?**

Having entered into the final part of his letter, James' emphasis has come to fall on prayer. The Christian congregation shows maturity in its life of prayer and intercession. This is not the first time that James has called attention to our prayer. Prayer is a theme that runs throughout his letter, and now he refers to it again in a very pastoral and practical sense.

James 5:14-15, however, has led to much discussion and disagreement. At first reading, it would seem that James here assures the church of instantaneous faith healing upon the prayer of the elders. James says in 5:15, "The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well." Is it really that simple? If so, we would not have to go to the doctor, but simply call the elders.

I would like to make a few remarks in general as we delve into this passage. First, we should never separate healing from prayer. Whether it involves medication or surgery, all healing is an act of God, given only upon prayer. Medication and doctors cannot save us from illness if the Lord does not decide to bless.

Second, there is here no guarantee whatsoever that whenever we are sick, all we have to do is call the elders and we will immediately be healed of our ailment. Indeed, some illnesses end in death, no matter how we approach them. Lest we fall into undue optimism with a passage such as this, we must remember what the Lord teaches elsewhere in the Bible: "death is the destiny of every man" (Eccl 7:2).

Third, when the Lord Jesus heard of Lazarus' illness, he said, "This sickness will not end in death" (John 11:4). Yet Lazarus did die, and God used his death and resurrection as a mighty testimony. So when we hear of illness unto

death—and that is a reality which must be faced—we must remember that Jesus Christ holds in his hands the keys to death and Hades (Rev 1:18). Death is not the final end, and we do not need to cling to this life at all costs.

James is not writing at all about so-called instantaneous faith healing; he is writing about the way prayer should function in the church of Christ. Does the maturity of faith become evident in the way prayer is used, both in our personal life and within the communion of saints? We learn that the church in the latter days must fully utilize the power of prayer as an effective means to withstand the temptations of the devil.

I had to think yet again of the “Sermon on the Mount”. The Lord Jesus spoke about the elaborate, public prayer of the Pharisees and about personal prayer behind closed doors. The two are combined by James in a beautiful way: the elders come to pray with us in the privacy of our home. These elders are not called to perform all kinds of rituals or to babble on, but they are called to engage in simple prayer. That is enough, for simple prayer is powerful and effective. The Lord calls us to be strengthened by prayer in the communion of saints. We will note that there should be prayer request, there must be pastoral response, and there will be personal relief.

### **Correlation Between Sin and Sickness**

Again James asks a short, penetrating question: “Is any one of you sick?” Of course, this is a reality in every congregation. There are the sick and the elderly who suffer the breakdown of the earthly tent. Now I will not deny that the word “sick” here can mean a physical illness of various sorts. Some Reformed explainers all too quickly say that physical sickness is ruled out in this verse, but James means indeed sickness in broad terms, including physical.

Yet we must understand that the word James uses means “to be weak”. Literally, he writes, “Is anyone among you weak?” This weakness may manifest itself in physical illness, but it also has a spiritual background. The contrast is not sickness versus healing, but weakness versus forgiveness.

The verb that is used for “making well” or “healing” is the same as that used for salvation: “he will be saved.” So we may translate the words of James a little differently: “Is anyone among you weak? The prayer offered in faith will *save* the weak person.” Notice also how in 5:15 and following, James speaks about sin and forgiveness. So the matter here is, first of all, one of sin and forgiveness. The healing is a matter of salvation, of being saved from sin. We may not always escape the effect of a sickness, but we can and will escape

the paralyzing bonds of sin and death.

There is a correlation between sin and sickness. Not every ailment is caused by a specific sin, but a sinful lifestyle can lead to physical or mental illness. I think that there is, however, another emphasis here. When we are seriously ill, and perhaps ill for a long time, we do become weak and this can also be true in a spiritual sense.

When a person is sick and lies in bed all day, he has a lot of time to think about his life. And when he then considers all his sins, he may certainly come into spiritual turmoil. He may think, “Did the Lord Jesus really die for me? Can I, a sinner, really be saved?” We know that Satan takes advantage of our weaknesses, especially in illness, and accuses us even more, telling us that there is no hope. There is much loneliness, depression, and sometimes despair in sickness, especially when the end seems to be drawing near. “How can I ever face the Lord God Almighty?”

### **Call the Elders**

James is a very practical pastor. He does not sidestep this important matter, but goes straight to the heart of it. He asks, “Is any one of you sick?” because he knows that we cannot deal with such adversity on our own. We cannot tough it out by ourselves, and there is no need to do so, either. Look at 5:14, where we read, “He should call the elders of the church...”

Let us note a few important items here. The phrase “he should call” could again be translated in a more emphatic sense, for it is an imperative, a command: “he *must* call the elders of the church.” We must not try to deal with it on our own, for why else did God give the communion and fellowship of the church?

We also should not call just anybody. James tells us to “call the elders of the church.” These elders, or pastors, have the prime responsibility to come to us and comfort us. Notice also that James specifically adds that the elders are “of the church” and are therefore those who have been lawfully ordained in their office. They are the ones who are called and enabled by the Lord to do this work. Through these elders, the Lord Jesus himself comes to us.

James has a good reason for formulating things in this way. There are many others we might want to call, such as family and friends. James does not forbid this, but says that those who must be called first and foremost are the elders of the church. We are to call them without discrimination, not

because we might like them so much as persons, but because of their office in the church, the household of the living God.

Sometimes I hear, “We’d rather not have this or that elder come on a visit.” That is wrong. If there is a problem with an elder, we must talk it out and work it through. We may prefer one over another, for life is filled with preferences, but we must accept all the elders of the church, for they stand in the same office and come with the same word. Otherwise, we run the danger that we handpick the few who will say what we want to hear.

## **Prayer Request**

We must call the elders of the church, men lawfully called and ordained by God. Let us note another aspect here. The initiative does not come from the elders, but from the one who is in need. We have a duty to *call* the elders. Literally the verse says, “Call them to you and call them into your situation.” We must ask them to come, and then tell them our true fears and woes. Otherwise, they still will not know what we need.

James does not say, “Call the minister.” Of course, the minister is a pastor among pastors, that is, the elders, and therefore James’ words apply also to him, but not exclusively. The minister’s first task is to labor in the Word, to preach and teach. James therefore tells us to call the elders, for they are all pastors. From a biblical perspective, I personally do not prefer to be called “Pastor” because all elders are pastors. They must be aware of this. The elder’s first task is pastoral, to comfort the sick and pray with them. Through the years, we have come to emphasize the ruling aspect of eldership. Some even speak of *ruling* elders, but we must emphasize the pastoral aspect and speak of *servicing* elders.

Sometimes it happens that people do not call the elders. If this is the case, the elders cannot know that there is a problem and they sometimes learn about important things after the fact. The elders cannot work properly this way. The initiative to find out what is needed lies not with them, but with the other members of the church. They must call the elders. And it is then a serious matter when the elders, including the minister, do not respond. There may be all kinds of reasons, but there is no excuse. We have the council of elders to meet all the needs of the people, yet it is the congregation’s responsibility to call and desire the visit of the elders.

There must be a prayer request, for then we recognize the communion of saints, the church of which we are members. In so doing, we follow the way Christ has opened, for he comes to us in and through the office bearers. I know

that some people do not like the expression “prayer request”. It can indeed be used too loosely, but it is something that must be more alive in our churches. We should request prayer, not just for the Sunday services, but also for the weekly struggle. We should not leave it up to the elders, but take some initiative ourselves. We may also request more family visits than the one annual home visit. If there is illness or a problem with sins and weaknesses, we should call the elders in. After all, that is why God gave them to us.

### **Pastoral Response**

When there is a request, the elders must come with a pastoral response. Let us not mistake the word “pastoral”. Some think that this means a nice friendly visit, and indeed, every visit should be friendly. But the Word of God, his promises and our obligations, must be spoken and sometimes things need to be said which are not pleasant in our ears. It would be every un-pastoral if the elders skimmed over the real problem and gave us platitudes.

In this respect, James writes something that needs our attention: “to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.” Before we discuss the aspect of anointing, notice the order of James’ words. First, he says, “pray over him.” Praying “over” someone means paying particular attention to his special needs. It is a prayer of intercession. That means the elders first have to listen. How can they address a matter in prayer, intercede for someone, if they have not listened to what his exact problem is? I also take it to mean that Scripture is read before or after the prayer, for reading and praying go together. The person’s needs are discussed, he is comforted with words from God, and then the intercession follows.

After that, there is “anointing with oil.” Now we can make a big deal out of this anointing, but James does not want us to do so. The oil has no power in itself, for we read in 5:15 that “the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.” We believe in the power of prayer, not the power of oil.

The oil is therefore symbolic. This does not make it unimportant, for James writes that the anointing must be done “in the name of the Lord.” God’s name is also invoked in the anointing, which makes it significant, but significant is not decisive. In the culture of James’ time, anointing with oil was a very meaningful action. In our society, this is not equally the case. I would like to also point out that *the anointing is not written in the imperative*. “Calling” and “praying” are strong, active verbs, but “anointing” is a participle, indicating a

custom or an ongoing activity. It is not a command, rather, more of a reference to an existing practice.

Should we today use oil in pastoral visits? The Roman Catholic sacrament of the extreme unction or last rights is based on this text. The sacrament is used to help the dying pass away more freely. Roman Catholics believe that the power is then in the oil. I once saw a television-evangelist offer little leak-proof vials of oil, made of a special recipe mentioned in the law of Moses (Ex 30:22-25) that people could buy for their aches and pains. That is an abuse of Scripture, for the sacred oil mentioned in the Old Testament was to be used to consecrate articles and men to special service. It had nothing to do with sickness and healing.

“The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well,” James says. The elders open the Word and show the truth of the Gospel, how God forgives the sins of those who believe in Jesus Christ. It is pastoral indeed, leading the flock to the great Shepherd and praying in his name for the sheep that is weak and perhaps sick. James emphasizes that it is the *prayer* of faith that makes someone well. He also writes that “the Lord will raise him up.” Lest anyone ascribe magical power to the elders or the oil, James emphasizes that *the Lord* will make him well. The verb used here is the same as “to save (from sin)”. Sin is the real issue. Forgiveness is the real blessing. Surety of forgiveness raises people up again, and allows them to function as God’s children.

## **Personal Relief**

James writes, “If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.” There will be personal relief. That is stated as a surety, a definite result. The fact that James clearly mentions sin here indicates that the matter is indeed first of all spiritual. What greater obstacle to healing is there than the thought that our sins will not be forgiven? When we think, “I am doomed to perish eternally,” we can suffer so deeply and not see a way out of our misery. We can pine away with incessant groaning, but we may not do so. We need not do so. We may experience relief in the communion of saints, where God has called everyone, but especially the elders, to come and comfort us, and to pray with us and over us that we may receive and believe the forgiveness of sins. Then all the doors to life go open again. “I believe the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting!” All doors open, right into the sanctuary of heaven.

What we are promised by the Lord in his Word and assured of by the elders is not that we will be healed of every illness, but that we are healed of the sickness of the soul, our sins and our guilt. We experience relief in the

spiritual distress that often accompanies sickness or is caused by long-term illness. There is relief in the knowledge that we shall not die, but shall live. Great are our sins, but greater still is God's love in Christ.

Someone once said to me, "You should visit so-and-so because she has a lot of problems with her legs." I did not mean it flippantly, but I responded, "Sorry, I don't deal with legs. I am not a doctor, but a pastor, and I deal with souls." The person who addressed me, however, meant precisely that as a pastor, I should go to encourage someone who was experiencing pain, immobility, and anguish from physical ailments and needed to be lifted up spiritually.

Life can be a burden in itself, even when things are going relatively well. But when times get really tough, and the weight of our own sins comes to press down hard on us so that we see no way out, there must be spiritual relief. In this, we need the support of the communion of saints, through the help of the appointed elders. Then we also have to listen to the Scriptural counsel and good advice of the elders, for they do not come without the Word.

James knows what life is like. He was a pastor for many years. He knows also where the ultimate problem lies and that we need to be assured of salvation. This alone will give us true relief, also when we face the last enemy, the dying unto sin, and enter into life eternal. We do not have to walk that lonesome valley by ourselves. We have the communion of saints, the pastors of the Lord, and in all this the Lord himself who has gone before us and says, "Come with me to my Father's house!"