

The Waiting Church and Its Duty: James 5:13-18

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Introduction

The great task of the Church, according to James, is to live in the hope of the coming of the Lord that has now drawn near (James 5:7-9). Even though the *parousia* is imminent, it is not subject to calculation. James regards the present hour as eschatological by virtue of the Gospel itself. Through this word, God has created believers as the “first fruits” of the final harvest (James 1:18). They represent the entrance of the endtime into the present time. Believers, therefore, must wait in an alien and hostile world for God’s righteousness to be established (James 5:9; 1:20). Their faith must undergo testing in order to come to perfection. The imminence of the Lord’s coming is not contradicted by delay, but accompanied by it. The early rains must be followed by the latter rains before the final harvest comes (James 5:7). Like a farmer waiting for “the precious produce of the field,” believers are to wait with patience. The prophets “who spoke in the name of the Lord” provide the pattern “of suffering and of perseverance” that we are to imitate. Those who persevere prove the goodness of God, that he is full of compassion and merciful (James 5:10-11).

Waiting for the endtime brings responsibilities toward one another in the meantime. One of the chief concerns of the letter is the conduct of believers in Christian community. James frames his admonitions mainly in negative terms, as warnings against the tendency to live by human wisdom. Faith in Jesus Christ is

incompatible with favoring the wealthy in the congregation. We must rather love our neighbor as ourselves, especially the neighbor in need (James 2:1-13). Not many are to become teachers within the congregation. Those who do so are to display their wisdom in kind and gentle behavior (James 3:1-2, 13-18). Conflicts within the congregation arise from the evil desires within its members, and are to be brought to an end by the repentance of each and every one involved (4:1-12). Believers must not “groan” to God against one another, calling down his judgment on their neighbor. The Judge himself is at the gates (James 5:9). Probably James’s stern prohibition against swearing an oath also has in view relations within the community of faith. Above all else, we are to be open and honest in our dealings with one another (James 5:12).

In the closing section of the letter, James provides positive instruction concerning the life of the waiting community of believers, giving us a glimpse of the way things ought to be among us (James 5:13-20). The initial exhortations are exceedingly brief: “Is someone among you suffering? Let that one pray. Is someone among you cheerful? Let that one sing praises.” That James characterizes well-being with a mere psychological term (*euthymei*), which signifies a good spirit or happy mood, corresponds to his larger message. Present prosperity and abundance are only temporary. Like the flower of grass, those who are rich shall wither and fall (James 1:9-11). All of us are like a

mist, which appears only briefly and then vanishes (James 4:14). Within this world we have only fleeting moments of joy, nothing that is substantial or enduring. Yet even these brief seasons of earthly happiness call for praise and thanksgiving to God, who is the source of all good (James 1:17). Both in sorrow and in joy, we are to direct our hearts to God. In such petition and praise all believers are united, however their immediate circumstances might differ.

The greatest part of the closing instructions deals with sickness and sin within the congregation. We often allow such matters to be pushed to the periphery of our life as a church. James places them at the center, undoubtedly because he sees in them the primary expression of the Gospel and its power. His instructions reflect both a sober realism about our condition in this world and a firm faith in the salvation granted us in Christ. Sadly, the practices that he enjoins have fallen into neglect and disuse in our churches.

Anointing the Sick

In the case of the anointing of the sick, our cultural distance from the text and the difficulties of interpretation have contributed to our reticence to appropriate James's instructions. All too often, the passage has been misused to reject medical care or to claim that God will heal all our illnesses here and now. These abuses of the text should not hinder us from using it rightly. The practice that James enjoins has its primary background in the authority Jesus gave to his disciples to proclaim the kingdom, cast out demons, and heal in his name. Mark's Gospel reports that in carrying out their commission the twelve, "anointed many who were sick with oil and healed them" (Mark

6:13). Undoubtedly the disciples' procedure had its roots in the common practice in the ancient world of anointing with oil for medicinal purposes.¹ In this respect, their approach to healing differed from Jesus, who, according to the Gospels, never employed oil in his healings. He rather merely spoke a word, simply touched his subjects, or applied his spittle (or a clay made from his spittle). The difference in the manner of healing likely signals Jesus' unique authority. His word or touch is sufficient to heal. His use of substances that would otherwise bring religious pollution marks him as standing above religion.² The disciples, on the other hand, conform to the contemporary practice of anointing with oil for healing. Jesus' implicit acceptance of their action signifies that he does not intend for them to reject the human arts of healing. The same conclusion applies to the passage from James with which we are concerned. His instructions are not to be construed as a prohibition against seeking medical treatment.

That is not to say that the disciples performed a mere medical procedure or that James envisages the elders of the church practicing medicine alongside prayer. The disciples' anointing of the sick took place under Jesus' authority. Its healing virtue did not rest any longer in the application of oil, but in the word of the One who had sent them forth. Medicine is not rejected here, but it is transcended. In the disciples' mission, anointing with oil became a visible sign of the healing that Jesus himself brings in his announcement of the kingdom. The same conclusion obviously applies to the passage in James. The elders are to anoint the one who is sick "in the name of the Lord," that is, by the authority of Jesus Christ (James 5:14). The

practice of anointing appears as a continuation of the commission that Jesus formerly gave to his disciples. The healing promised in the name of the risen Lord stands in continuity with Jesus' own healings and manifests the kingdom of God that he proclaimed.³

It is important to notice a number of the details of the text in order to rightly understand the anointing of the sick as James envisions it. In the first place, James expects the ailing member of the congregation to initiate the visitation by the elders. He does not have in view a rite that effects healing of itself. The faith of the one who is sick (and that one's own desire for healing) plays a fundamental role in the anointing. James's language here implies a formal summoning of the elders of the church. This is no mere visit by an individual Christian, nor by a pastor alone. No special gift of healing to a particular believer comes into view here (cf. 1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30). The elders probably represent the congregation as a whole. The elders are to pray "upon" the one who is sick and "anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Again, the anointing is not viewed as working of itself, but rather is an expression of faith in God's healing power. The "prayer of faith," not the anointing in and of itself, brings healing (James 5:15). James has just instructed the one who is suffering to pray (James 5:13). That does not mean, however, that Christians do not need the prayers of others. Christians especially need others' prayers in times of illness and weakness. Here the church itself, through its elders, is called upon to intercede for one of its members. The unusual expression, "to pray upon" which James employs here probably signifies the authority of Jesus, in whose name the elders pray.⁴ They of-

fer their petition as representatives of the Church that belongs to him and bears his commission. Just as Peter announced to Aeneas, "Jesus Christ heals you!" (Acts 9:34), so James understands such healings to come from Jesus himself.

It is clear James has a debilitating, life-threatening condition in view. The one who is afflicted is instructed to summon the elders, which suggests that the illness prevents him or her from coming to them. The promise that "the Lord will raise that one up" likewise presupposes that the ailing person is bedridden. Nevertheless, the name formerly given to the Roman Catholic rite, "extreme unction," misses the point of the text, and is better designated (as it now is), "the anointing of the sick." It is not at all clear that James imagines the one who receives the anointing to be at the hour of death. And the anointing is given as a promise of healing, not merely as a preparation for death.

Does James then imagine that every Christian who follows this practice will receive immediate healing, or that the absence of immediate recovery reveals a lack of faith? That would hardly fit the witness of Paul, who suffered with a "thorn in the flesh," which the Lord did not remove (2 Cor 12:7-10), who once feared that he might lose Epaphroditus to illness (Phil 2:25-27), and who on at least one occasion had to leave an ailing companion behind (2 Tim 4:20).⁵ James, too, expects a testing of faith through trial, not an immediate deliverance from trouble. This is the theme that begins and ends his letter. Moreover, from the first century to the present believers have grown ill and passed away; otherwise the first witnesses to the Gospel would still be here with us!

How then are we to understand the promise James offers that "the prayer of

faith shall save the one who is sick and the Lord shall raise that one up"? The best interpretation by far is that which recognizes that James alludes to our final "salvation" and our "being raised" from the dead. With a gentle play upon words, James simultaneously leaves open the possibility of immediate healing while pointing to the hope of the resurrection. Faith in Jesus Christ and the prayer uttered in faith unfailingly save. Of this the one who is ill may be unconditionally assured. Healing may delay, but it shall certainly come. This hope of the resurrection in no way replaces a physical healing with a "spiritual" one. James directs our attention to the ultimate and abiding healing that we await, which is unambiguously physical, and in which all sickness and death shall forever be removed. Even the healings that Jesus performed in the course of his earthly ministry were temporary signs of the presence of the kingdom that is yet to come in its fullness. James understands that God still grants such healings when and where he wills to do so. The way in which he describes the anointing of the sick suggests that he regards any immediate healings that may occur as continuations of Jesus' ministry. As we have noted, they take place "in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14), and like Jesus' own healings anticipate the permanent healing that is yet to take place. Such healings display the authority given to Christ, and serve as tangible signs that God is merciful and that his purposes for his people are good. Yet, they are merely transient signs that point to the arrival of the kingdom. James has just directed his readers to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord. It should come as no surprise, then, that he subtly reminds them of it in this context. Until the Lord appears, one

of the trials that all believers must endure is that of sickness and death. The practice of anointing with oil that James enjoins provides a visible sign of the Lord's promise to save us. In each individual case, it rests with him whether he grants an immediate and temporary "salvation" as a sign of that which is yet to come, or whether he calls that person to wait for the ultimate and permanent healing of the resurrection. It would encourage the faith of many believers in times of trial and bring much glory to God if we took up the practice of anointing and prayer for the sick in our churches.

James closes this instruction with the promise that if the one who is ill "has committed sins, it shall be forgiven him" (James 5:15). His conception of salvation contains a dynamic element. Sins have a real effect. Evil desire, when it has come to completion, brings forth sin, and sin brings death (James 1:14-15). This is true not merely for the world, but also for the believers whom James addresses in these verses. James regards it as possible that the ailment that has struck the one in need is the result of particular transgressions. The Scriptures elsewhere clearly indicate that God may well send sickness or even death as a temporal punishment for certain sins.⁶ He does this to discipline his children and keep them from further evil. Yet not all sickness is the result of specific sins. James merely raises the possibility that such is the case. Moreover, those who belong to Christ have a weapon to which they may resort: prayer by other Christians in the name of the Lord, in whom there is forgiveness of sins. Here sin and death are overcome.

It is worth remembering that in the biblical understanding, sickness and death are the result of our fallen state. Not

every affliction that comes to us is the result of particular transgressions, but all illness ultimately derives from our sinfulness. Indeed, the Scriptures sometimes use the image of incurable wounds or sickness to describe human sinfulness and rebellion.⁷ From this perspective, the incarnation of the Son of God can be seen to have enormous significance. He took our condition upon himself in order to redeem us from it: “He himself took our illnesses and bore our diseases” (Isa 53:4; Matt 8:17). His cross accomplished our forgiveness, and for this reason worked our healing: “by his wounds you were healed” (1 Pet 2:24). The healings that Jesus performed were not mere “wonders” standing arbitrarily alongside his offer of forgiveness. They were visible expressions of the effect of that forgiveness, which secures participation in the coming kingdom of God: “In order that you might know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and walk” (Mark 2:10-11). To possess the forgiveness of sins is to possess eternal life, freedom from sin and death.

The Call to Prayer

It is not at all surprising, then, that James draws a conclusion from the promise of healing that is applicable to the entire community of believers: “Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you might be healed. The prayer of a righteous person effects much, since it actively works” (James 5:16). Here again, James engages in a play upon words. In the first instance, the “healing” that results from mutual confession most likely is the remission of sins itself. In accord with other biblical writers, James pictures sin as a “sickness”

from which only the Lord can deliver us. We are powerless to save ourselves. We must cling to the Lord and the prayer offered in his name.

Secondly, an echo of James’s preceding allusion to the resurrection from the dead as the ultimate healing is heard in this verse as well. The “healing” from sin, which is the object of our prayer for one another, will find its full expression when we are raised from the dead. Then, and only then, such petitions may cease. The loss of this practice within our churches is to be lamented even more than the loss of the anointing of the sick. We are so unaccustomed to it and unpracticed in it, that it has become very difficult for us to implement. James does not intend for us to become introspective. Confession of conscious sins is sufficient. Furthermore, James surely does not wish for us to violate the dignity, trust, or private concerns of other persons in the confession of our own sins. Undoubtedly other factors must be taken into consideration as well. Most importantly, the focus of our confession must remain upon our prayer for one another. That is James’s primary topic. He does not measure the effect of the confession by our soul-searching, but by the promise attached to prayer. Otherwise, mutual confession may devolve into a vain exercise in self-achieved catharsis. Despite all the difficulties attached to it, however, the practice is worth recovering. James calls us to something more biblical and profound than the “accountability groups” that have currently become so popular among evangelical Christians. Mere accountability to one another can effect outward change and conformity to group standards, but it has no power to transform the human heart. The Church has a far greater calling, and far greater

resources in the Gospel. Our prayer for one another in the name of Jesus Christ brings with it the forgiveness of sins and the healing of our persons, which God alone can work. We have been given the responsibility of participating in his work in one another's lives.⁸

As an example of the efficacy of the prayer of a righteous person, James points to the biblical story of Elijah. He is introduced as "a human being, like to us in passions" (*anthrōpos ēn homoiopathēs hēmin*). Probably James is countering the common image of Elijah as a spiritual hero, by pointing to his weaknesses that appear in the biblical narrative (see 1 Kings 19:4-18). Elijah was a righteous man, but he was at the same time a sinner like us. For this reason, we can take encouragement from his experience. It was Elijah's fervent prayer that was powerful, first bringing drought for three and a half years and then bringing the drought to an end (James 5:17-18).⁹ As is frequently the case in this letter, the example that James chooses is a tangible representation of the truth he wishes to teach. Rain was withheld from Israel as a judgment upon it and Ahab its king, who had led it astray to the worship of Baal (1 Kings 18:18). The end of the drought followed Elijah's triumphant confrontation with the prophets of Baal and the conversion of the people (1 Kings 18:41-46). In calling attention to this part of the story, James may be quietly reminding his readers of the efficacy of their cries to "the Lord of hosts," who shall finally bring judgment upon those who oppress the poor (James 5:4-6). His elaboration of the effect of Elijah's second petition is likewise revealing: "He prayed again, and the heaven showered rain, and the earth sent forth its fruit" (James 5:18). James here recalls Isaiah

55:10-11, where God's word is said to effect his saving purposes just as certainly as the rain and snow cause the earth to yield its produce. James is perhaps reminding us that behind Elijah's prayer stands the word of God. The prophet merely entered into the effecting of God's purposes in his praying. Even more importantly, the allusion to Isaiah speaks of the accomplishment of God's saving purposes on earth. Just as Elijah's prayer brought about a time of repentance and blessing, so believers in Christ may take courage that God will hear their prayer for one another and bring to pass their petitions. Again, James's glance is cast forward to the coming of the Lord. The text of Isaiah that he echoes intimates a new creation, in which heaven and earth experience peace and blessing.

Restoring Sinners

James's final exhortation deals with the duties of Christians toward those who fall away. The passage therefore forms something of a chiasm. The opening instruction concerning the anointing of the sick has its counterpart in the restoration of the apostate believer. We need not enter into questions concerning the perseverance of the saints here. It is sufficient to recognize that at least in outward and visible ways, those who name Christ as Savior sometimes do "wander astray from the truth" (James 5:19).¹⁰ Although we shall not be able to persuade all of them, we shall be able by the grace of God to persuade some of them. We have a duty, like Jesus himself, to seek out the lost sheep, whoever they might be. Probably James continues to recall something of the Scriptural account of Elijah's ministry, since in his encounter with the prophets of Baal, Israel was turned back to the Lord

(1 Kings 18:37). Despite debate on the question, it is most likely that when James speaks of someone turning a sinner from “the error of *his* way” and thereby saving “his soul from death,” he has in view the salvation of the one who has fallen into error.¹¹ The one who does so “covers a multitude of sins.”

In this final appeal, James implicitly appeals to believers to be like God, who is unchangingly good to all persons (James 1:17). He is the one who has saved all of us from death and who has covered all our sins in Jesus Christ. When we consider all these exhortations together, it becomes quite clear what James expects of the Church as it waits for its Lord: We are to be “little Christs” to one another, meeting one another in the present misery of sickness and sin with the promise of the Gospel and the power of prayer in Jesus’ name.

ENDNOTES

¹ See, for example, the references in H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, Band 3 (Munich: C. H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1961) s.v. Mark 6:13 (1:11-12); James 5:14 (3:759).

² See David Smith, “Jesus and the Pharisees in Socio-anthropological Perspective” *Trinity Journal* 6 (1985) 151-156.

³ Jesus’ healings stand alongside his proclamation as a witness to the kingdom. On this topic, see H. K. Nielsen, *Heiligung und Verkündigung: Das Verständnis der Heilung und Ihres Verhältnisses zur Verkündigung bei Jesus und in der ältesten Kirche*, Acta Theologica Danica 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1987).

⁴ The only parallel to James’s usage which I have been able to locate in searches of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae and the

Scriptures is found in the Hebrew text of Job 42:8, where God informs Job’s would be comforters that he shall pray “upon” (i.e. “concerning”) them (*wə’iyyôb ‘abdî yitpallēl ‘ălêkem*) and God shall accept his prayer. In James 2:7 the rich are said to blaspheme “the noble name which is named upon you.” James here has in mind the name of Jesus Christ to whom believers belong. The biblical idiom expresses God’s ownership and blessing (e.g. 2 Sam 6:2, Isa 63:19, Jer 34:15, Dan 9:18, Amos 9:12). It may be that the expression here reflects the invocation of Jesus’ name upon the synagogue of believers.

⁵ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 244-245.

⁶ See for example John 5:14; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Cor 11:30.

⁷ E.g., Jer 3:22; Hos 7:1; Ps 107:17-20; Mark 2:17. See Johannes Hempel, *Heilung als Symbol und Wirklichkeit im Biblischen Schrifttum*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965).

⁸ On this topic see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translation and introduction by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954).

⁹ In attributing the period of rainlessness to Elijah’s prayer, James builds upon the biblical narrative, perhaps finding an indication of prayer in Elijah’s opening word to Ahab, “As the Lord the God of Israel lives, . . .” See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 336.

¹⁰ The dynamic element within James’s conception of salvation again comes to expression here. The believer who

restores the sinner saves a life from death (James 5:20). Only those who continue in faith shall receive salvation (James 1:12, 2:14-26, 5:11).

¹¹The coordination of the pronouns and the general thrust of the passage argue for this reading.