

As he closes his letter to the twelve tribes scattered abroad James has some final exhortations, or are they commands? Celebrations, illnesses, unconfessed sins, faults between one another, the power, uses and value of prayer, the grace and mercy of forgiveness and retrieval of an erring one. These topics are intertwined in marvelous ways with examples which are instructive to us as we study this passage. In general he speaks of:

- * prayer when afflicted, and not cursing circumstances or the apparent perpetrators of conditions that have befallen us;
- * singing psalms when happy, not foolish carousing;
- * insights into the relationship of sins, illness and death;
- * the healing benefit of confessing fault to one another rather than harboring hurts and grudges;
- * converting or retrieving an erring one thereby covering his sins;
- * prayer for relief from illness;
- * prayer for God's chastening intervention in national or congregational affairs;
- * prayer for lifting of God's imposed chastisement on the nation or congregation.

Illness We have a wonderful resource if we should fall ill. We rightly tend to dismiss minor, temporary ailments as our lot as humans in a sin cursed world. We are encouraged to seek medical treatment, use medicine, modify our diet, when needed, 1Timothy 5:23. But here in James we learn not to lightly dismiss every illness that might strike. Illnesses (and "misfortunes") have a cause, a reason, a purpose. Some may be reaping what has been sown. Some may result from exposure while sacrificially serving the Lord, Romans 12:1, Philippians 2:24-30, or while sacrificially caring for an ailing one. Some health problems and "accidental" injuries may be training to develop endurance in hardship. There are a number of instances in the New Testament where healing was not immediate or not granted at all. Note 2Tim 4:11, "Only Luke [the beloved physician] is with me" . . . 20, "Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick."

Some physical issues are simply preventative discipline, 2Corinthians 12, and some of these are long term with no hope of cure or even alleviation. For many ailments, illnesses, or accidents and wounding there is no immediately apparent deserving conduct or beneficial reason. But James intimates some illnesses are chastening because of sin in one's life. Anyone who is ill is encouraged to call others, the elders, godly brothers, to his bed to pray for him. And James mentions, almost by the by, if he have committed sins they shall be forgiven him. Physical healing is then connected with confession of faults to others. How often illnesses stem from emotional stress and a bad conscience. But John, on the other hand, states there is a sin unto death and he does not encourage prayer

for that, 1John 5:14-17. What is a sin unto death? Murder for one. The government of men over men was established by God after the Flood. Government is authorized, (actually required) by the Creator to take the life of a murderer. There are other crimes subject to death under the just judgement of an authorized ruler.

But short of capital criminal acts, a person may commit a sin unto death that is imposed more or less directly by God Himself. A heart attack, an auto accident is not usually His direct intervention for a sin hidden or known in the life of the "victim" but it can be. Note, it is not the business of others to determine if an affliction one is experiencing is due to some sin in his, or her, life. But it is an important question for the one afflicted to ask the Lord about and to search his heart a bit. A "sin unto death" is to be confessed to others and the guilty soul "converted." Even though the sin is unto death he does not perish if he is saved by faith in the shed blood of the Lamb. Or if still unsaved he may become saved at that point because of an illness, injury or an impending execution. I believe James is speaking of either believers or unbelievers. The ultimate consequence of any sin is physical death but some may be healed postponing their death. And many are saved from an untimely physical death from an illness or injury if a believer goes after him. Personally proclaiming Christ to him can bring him to heartfelt conviction, confession and repentance, and a real lasting (and eternal) conversion from his ways

The Lord Jesus has assured us not every illness or ailment or handicap is due to a sinful act, John 9:1-3. Some are simply that God might in some way be glorified. We would not thwart the glory to God that may be contingent upon our illness by complaining against Him. Job was hammered by Satan with God's permission. Satan intended to cause Job to curse God leading to his consequential early demise in disgrace. Note that Job was eternally secure and knew it, Job 19:25. James earlier cites Job's endurance. In real life we reap what we sow, Galatians 6:7-9. God is not mocked, but He does work all things together for good for those who love Him and are the called according to His purpose, Roman 8:28. Never the less God may lift or modify consequences of our sins, He has not bound Himself to punish us. Consequences are for our benefit and for a testimony to sinners observing our lives. Christ was judged and punished for our sins on the cross. So, God may grant a "crop failure" to that which we sowed. But don't count on it, and especially don't sin with forethought of taking advantage of His mercy. Romans 6:1 is clear on that evil thought. God's healing intervention can be facilitated through the prayer of faith of His own interceding on another's behalf, as did Abraham for Lot, Genesis 14 and 18. Without that, the pain maybe be severe and prolonged and death may ensue. Sins do have consequences that God may see fit to leave in place and daily supply sufficient

grace to endure it. On the other hand God may choose to totally lift the consequences of our sins, as it suits Him, especially if we have learned the lesson He sought to teach. Job did, and he was restored to health, esteem and prosperity.

God doesn't owe us healing. Some attempt to falsely claim the right to healing based upon Isaiah 53:4-6. They say it is lack of faith if we are sick today. But Isaiah is prophesying a national and spiritual healing for Israel. Jesus did heal the sick when here but it was a sign to Israel as to Who He Is. Peter cites this in connection with spiritual salvation not physical healing, 1Peter 2:23.

The role of the anointing with oil is also held by some to have a ritual value toward healing. This is questionable, but the oil itself has beneficial physical effects as well as the soothing comfort and protective benefits of a back rub especially for a bed ridden patient. If its use is advocated for medicinal and comfort purposes instantaneous healing is not expected. It is mentioned as being used by the disciples with the sick., Mark 6:13, when they healed as a sign the Messiah was there among them. The prayer of faith has the underlying assurance of God's goodness and His working all things together for good for His own.

Prayer James seems to have been stirred by thoughts of Job's endurance and Elijah's boldness in faithful prayer in writing this last part of his letter. Job is a godly man who suffered deep and prolonged painful illness as well as overwhelming loss. So James addresses the need of prayer for those who suffer from illnesses. But though he commends visitation of the sick and needy here and in chapter 1:27 he reminds us it is the Lord who raises up the sick through the prayer of faith by godly elders, no matter what remedies, medicines or comforting hands we may bring. So let us pray for and with one another when they are suffering. But what a contrast to Job's sorry friends who instead of praying for him spent their days falsely accusing him of sin as a cause of his wretchedness. These were like fiery darts of the wicked one, quenched only by the shield of faith, Ephesians 6:16. Satan is a ready and willing destroyer when allowed access to one like Job who is a faithful and obedient child of God. But God may also deliver an actively sinning professing believer to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord. 1Corinthians 5, 1Timothy 1:20. Satan delights to destroy these too, whether truly believers or not, for this dishonors the Lord Jesus Christ whom he hates for thwarting his ambitions to be like God, Isaiah 14:12-15. "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." We are our brother's keeper indeed. Matthew 18:15-20.

James' example of powerful prayer is Elijah's. He was a man like us, but who was greatly moved by the departure of his fellow Israelites from their God. They had, centuries before, been planted in the wonderful land God gave them

after delivering them from the clutches of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. God forecast their unfaithfulness and wickedness to Moses even before they entered Canaan, Deuteronomy 31:16-29. Centuries later, in the midst of it, Elijah is found praying about it. What an example for us who find ourselves in the midst of almost universal departure and unfaithfulness in Christendom today. Departure forecast by Peter, 1Peter 4:15-19; Paul, 2Timothy 3; and the Lord himself in Revelation 2 and 3. Nehemiah and Daniel are among others, like Elijah, who interceded in prayer on behalf of the sins of their people though godly and righteous themselves. They exhibit the spirit of Christ. We can do that too for one another, for all Christians today.

While we are not told the words or exact sentiments of Elijah's prayers, he was moved by the Spirit to pray earnestly for God's intervention. God apparently revealed to him that His intervention was to be a famine and was to be announced to King Ahab by none other than Elijah himself. James labels Elijah's prayer effectual and fervent. To understand Elijah's faithful act of love for God and His people, Israel, we might consider what Elijah would do today if the United States was indeed a Christian nation as some wistfully claim. If Elijah were here today he might pray for an economic meltdown to waken a nation which salutes its trust in God on its currency and coins but has consistently continued its departure from righteousness and justice and moral uprightness which God requires of nations. We believers would with Elijah suffer under the discipline imposed upon the nation by a faithful God. But there is no such thing in scripture as a Christian nation today. The Lord Jesus tells Pilate "my kingdom is not of this world, otherwise my disciples would fight," John 18:36. So we endure God's disciplines necessary to hold the Gentiles check until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled and He sends His Son to conquer and reign. But, what grace, He uses the same hardships to open ears of sinners to the gospel while He waits.

Elijah himself is marked as a righteous man, a quality brought about by godliness and knowledge of God obtained from the scriptures. Ahab had access to the scriptures as well, and indeed was required as each new king to copy out the scriptures for himself upon his coronation. Whether he had done this we are not told but he chose to heed his horribly wicked Canaanite wife Jezebel instead of God's word and God's Law. James gives the story behind the story related in 1Kings 17:1—; Luke 4:25. Moved by God Elijah boldly marched into Ahab's court and announced there would be a famine until he lifted it, walked out and disappeared. He himself suffered the consequences of his pronouncement. First living by a stream on raven borne carrion (road kill) he had to leave his homeland when the stream dried up. 3 1/2 years later he killed the prophets of Baal and lifted the famine. A victory of faith and prayer.

By Ron Canner, Oct. 8, 2008.