

Psalm 1, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-end

The last section of the letter of James, The brother of Jesus, has the heading in my bibles;

The Prayer of faith; James' experience of Christian Community and his vision for the church is a congregation of people who pray and praise? [5:13f]

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray.

Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

Is any 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."

Every life experience can be reflected back to God in prayer. The congregation was a community of believers and all of life was brought to God in prayer.

In a church with Cell groups a lot of the shared prayer and pastoral care goes on in the small groups where people know each other and where caring and healing relationships happen naturally over a cup of coffee. Supportive friendships are built. Many of the New Testament churches would have been meeting in houses and networking with other groups just as we do.

Small groups are of great value within a congregation. It is possible to feel lost in a large congregation but when we are a member of a small group we more quickly feel we belong. It is especially important in communities like the English speaking Community in Eindhoven where many of us are far away from our families and friends and also scattered across the city and surrounds of Eindhoven

James is writing for churches like ours.

Are you Sad? Are you in trouble?

God is longing to give to us what is best. As we come to God in our sadness we can grow closer to Him.

Are you; Happy? Content? Satisfied?

Prayer is not just for emergencies; When we are happy we shouldn't be full of self-congratulation at our luck or skill. Giving thanks to God through praise and thanksgiving is how we stay in touch with reality and grow close to The Lord.

When we are Sick we also feel the need pray.

Cases of sickness are rightly the concern of the Cell Group and the whole church.

James is not giving us a magic formula. He says [5:14]

“Is any of you sick?

Let him call for the elders of the church.”

In the gospels we see that Jesus & the Apostles were regularly healing the sick. One fifth of the Gospels, 3,700 verses are related to healing miracles.

In the Acts of the Apostles miraculous healing led up to or followed the preaching of the gospel.

The healing ministry was important throughout the first centuries of the church.

James wrote; **“The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up.”** [5:15].

How did James anticipate that this would work out in practice? James expects that the person who is sick would take the initiative to ask for prayer.

It is not a command but a permission.

James doesn't mention anything about the sick persons faith. This is sensible because many Christians who are ill do find that personal prayer is difficult when they are physically low. Praying for the sick needs to be done with loving care.

The faithful prayer is on the part of the elders?

St Paul wrote of those who had a gift of healing and the gift of faith. The gifts the Holy Spirit gives should be exercised with some humility. God's gifts are a treasure we are entrusted with, not something to be proud about or to exploit for personal gain.

I have heard some sad stories of sick Christians who in faith have asked for prayer. Those who prayed for them showed great confidence in praying but when the person was not healed quickly they suggested it was because the sick person lacked faith.

That can't be right! The sick person ended up still sick and feeling condemned too.

James would not have approved of that kind of prayer ministry. Our prayers are not powerful because of big words or an emotional delivery.

The Elders were the pastors and overseers known for their wisdom and maturity. The responsibility to pray in faith was on the church leaders. It was a quiet ministry of prayer and anointing with oil for the sick.

James [5:15] gives his instruction and promise.

“pray in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.”

The phrase **“will make the sick person well”**, [NIV] is one word in Greek and it is the same verb used for “save”. James is expressing the faith that the Holy Spirit is still at work in the Church to save & to heal. Prayer is a truly positive way to use our tongues for good purposes!

They were to pray in the **“name of the Lord”**.

It is God who heals, not the oil or faith or the elders who pray. Like all prayer it is subject to God's will. But God often waits for our prayers of faith before he intervenes to heal a person.

James adds; **“the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”** [5:16].

What is it that makes our prayers powerful?

The Jewish Christians James was writing to would know the description of the righteous man in Psalm 1.

**“Blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law of the Lord
and on his law he meditates day and night.”**

The Jewish people thought of a righteous person as one who sought to live a life pleasing to God in obedience to his word. These were the kind of people the Apostles appointed as leaders of congregations.

The coming of the elders to a sick person represents the Church and the reassurance that the sick person is still part of the congregation.

We know from the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul that Christians prayed regularly for one another. But Physical healing was not the outcome every time people were prayed for.

- On one of his journeys Paul had to leave his helper Trophemus behind at Miletus because he was ill.
- I don't doubt that they had prayed for him.

- Paul had a thorn in his own flesh and though he prayed earnestly three times it wasn't taken away.
- Many good and saintly people died in Apostolic times as they do today.
- Praying for healing didn't exclude using medical means.
- Paul advised Timothy to take wine with his water for the sake of his stomach - medicine to purify the water and make it safe.

Oil was, and still is, used in medical treatments. Oil was used to sooth wounds in Old Testament times [Isaiah 1:6]. In Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan the victim's wounds were treated with wine and oil [Luke 10:34]. Anointing with oil [5:14] probably also symbolized the Holy Spirit.

It was a sign of God's goodness and an encouragement to faith and joy; of restoration and strength.

But why are some people not healed when we pray for them? James seems to give a guarantee of healing. How do we understand that and put his teaching into practice without raising false expectations?

I believe in miracles and I believe that the Lord our God is able to answer our prayers. What I don't know why he answers one prayer and not another.

We can see this same pattern in the book of Acts;

- James the brother of John, had his head cut off in Prison but
- Peter was rescued from prison in Jerusalem by an angel in answer to prayer but then later Peter was not rescued from Crucifixion in Rome
- Paul suffered various beatings and stonings, imprisonments, shipwrecks but was saved through it all to carry on until finally he was beheaded in Rome
- James the brother of Jesus and writer of the letter of James was also executed in Jerusalem in AD62 for refusing to deny his faith in Christ.
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- In the same way prayer for healing is subject to the normal conditions of prayer. It is a mystery but those who pray for healing see more healing than those who don't. We have to listen to the

sick persons request and we look to The Lord for his blessing.

There is sometimes a connection between sickness and sin which James draws attention to.

He is not implying that all sickness is because of our personal failings.

When we first went to Paraguay and lived with the indigenous people we were shocked to discover that two out of every four children died before their 5th birthday. Of the two who survived one would be physical and mentally stunted because of poor nutrition. Only one in 4 grew up healthy and strong. It wasn't because of the children's sin or their parents sin but structural economic factors that meant the parents could not provide adequately for their children. Explain...

In our own context we are all aware that some lifestyle choices can lead to poor health outcomes.

For some of us the wrong things we have done or failed to do can weigh on our conscience & that also can make us ill.

James says: **"confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."**

At times it can be helpful to confess our sins to another Christian. Sharing with a Christian friend can be a great help. It needs to be a person we trust to listen without judgement and pray without gossiping.

Three Christians went away for a day to a retreat centre to spend time in prayer. They felt confident in each other's company. One opened his heart and confessed that he had a serious problem with drinking too much alcohol. Another mentioned that he was struggling with an addiction to gambling and asked for prayer. The third also had a problem but he didn't think it was such a big failing as lack of control in drinking or gambling. He had a tendency to enjoy a good gossip.

He obviously had not read the Epistle of James and taken to heart the importance of controlling our tongues. If we are going to be useful in praying for our friends and neighbours we have to know how to keep a confidence.

Confession in the right context and prayer can together assure us that we are accepted and bring new courage, comfort and healing. Our God will always forgive if we will truly repent.