

Prayer, Healing, and Restoration



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *James 5:13–20; 1 John 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:54; Heb. 12:12, 13; John 8:43–45; Prov. 10:12.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much” (*James 5:16, NASB*).

People are fascinated by the miraculous and the magical. They often are drawn to such things as spectacles or matters of curiosity and nothing more. So, when Jesus was asked to perform a miracle merely for entertainment (*Luke 23:8, 9*) or as a sign of His Messiahship (*Matt. 12:38–41*) or even to satisfy a legitimate need of His own (*Matt. 4:2–4*), He refused. The Spirit, by which Jesus taught authoritatively and effected miraculous healings, is not simply a power to be used; we are to be instruments in His hands. God would gladly heal everyone who is sick, but He is interested in a more substantial, lasting healing.

Thus, in this context, we will look at some crucial questions: How do we understand the words in James about the healing of the sick? Is there a relationship between healing and forgiveness in answer to prayer? Elijah is presented as an important model of prayer in a time of widespread apostasy. What can we learn from his life of prayer and his work of calling Israel back to God and true worship?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 20.

The Essential Christian Toolkit

Read James 5:13. What interesting contrast is he presenting here? How do we apply these admonitions to our own experiences?

Though dealing with two different things (suffering, cheerfulness), James links them with prayer and praise: pray when you are suffering, praise when you are cheerful. The two practices are not that different from each other, however, because many biblical psalms of praise are also prayers, and James begins the epistle urging readers to “consider it all joy” when falling into various trials, “knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (*James 1:2, 3, NASB*). The time to pray and the time to praise might be more intertwined than we generally think.

The word for “suffering” in James 5:13 (*NASB*) is from the same root as the word used earlier to refer to the suffering of the prophets (*vs. 10*). It refers to both physical and mental suffering—“first and foremost for the danger and toil of war” (Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 239), but also to exhausting manual labor and costly effort. It is used in 2 Timothy 2:9 and 4:5, too, to describe “the hard apostolic labor that is not deterred by any difficulty or suffering.”—*Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 240. As Christians, we instinctively turn to God when trouble comes. Prayer is especially essential in facing difficulties, but singing or playing sacred music (the word used, *psalletō*, can mean either) is also helpful.

“Singing is as much an act of worship as is prayer. Indeed, many a song is prayer.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 168. How many of us have been depressed or lonely, only to have the words of a hymn come to mind and lift our spirits? There are many among us who are suffering or need encouragement and would be cheered by a visit filled with prayer and song. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (*Rom. 12:15, NKJV*). It may lift our spirits, too, as nothing else can.

The book of Psalms especially is a treasure house of prayers and songs that can provide inspiration, encouragement, and direction when we do not know where to turn for help.

We all know how suffering can draw us closer to the Lord and how it can drive us to prayer. What, though, are the spiritual dangers that come when things are going well for us? Why, especially in those times, is praise so important? What does it help us never to forget?

Prayer for the Sick

Read James 5:14, 15. What are the essential elements James prescribes for anointing the sick, and what important spiritual components are found in these texts?

The fact that the sick person calls for the elders of the church to come and anoint him or her “with oil in the name of the Lord” and pray expresses the spiritual desire of the individual and the collective conviction that divine intervention is needed for healing (*Mark 6:13*). The reference to the forgiveness of sins shows that God will not, by means of a ritual, restore a person physically who does not also desire spiritual healing. “To those who desire prayer for their restoration to health, it should be made plain that the violation of God’s law, either natural or spiritual, is sin, and that in order for them to receive His blessing, sin must be confessed and forsaken.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 228.

The request for divine intervention and the summoning of the elders of the church suggest that the illness is incapacitating and, perhaps, also too urgent to be done in connection with a regular church gathering. Two different Greek words are used for the sick here: the first (*astheneō* in verse 14) is also used of Dorcas who “became sick and died” (*Acts 9:37, NKJV*); the second (*kamnō* in verse 15) refers generally to the patient, but it is also used of those who are dying and, in this context, seems to mean someone physically worn out or wasting away. Miraculous healing may happen in answer to “the prayer of faith.” The desire for healing requires full surrender to God’s will, whatever it is (*1 John 5:14*). However, the references to “sav[ing]” and “rais[ing]” the sick (compare “shall save . . . from death” in James 5:20) point unmistakably to the resurrection as representing the only complete healing, the time “when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality” (*1 Cor. 15:54*).

Many of us have known about anointing services, or have even been involved in them, in which the sick are not healed but in fact die. Why, then, is the hope of the resurrection, implied in these texts, our only surety?

Healing for the Soul

More important than the healing of the body is the healing of the soul. Our purpose is not, after all, to make people healthier sinners but to point them to the eternal life found in Jesus. Perhaps that is why the only clear reference to healing in the passage for this week is our memory text in verse 16, which moves away from the hypothetical situations dealt with in verses 13–15. The word for healing in this verse (*iaomai*) can refer to healing that goes beyond the cure of physical illness (see, for example, *Matt. 13:15*). Having already in verse 15 hinted at a broader understanding of healing (the resurrection), James makes the connection between illness and sin, the latter being the root cause of all our problems—not that every illness can be traced back to a particular sin but that sickness and death are the results of us all being sinners.

Read Mark 2:1–12 (compare *Heb. 12:12, 13; 1 Pet. 2:24, 25*). **What kind of healing do these passages describe, and what is the basis of this healing?**

Faith in Jesus brings healing from spiritual weakness and sin. In a sense, every healing Jesus performed was a parable meant to draw people's attention to their deeper need of salvation. In the case of the paralyzed man in Mark 2, spiritual healing was actually the man's uppermost concern, which is why Jesus immediately assured him that his sins were forgiven. Yet, "it was not physical restoration he desired so much as relief from the burden of sin. If he could see Jesus, and receive the assurance of forgiveness and peace with Heaven, he would be content to live or die, according to God's will."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 267. While God's healers today should employ all available medical means to cure disease, efforts should be made also to heal the whole person, not just for this life but in view of eternity.

Healing includes the healing of relationships, which is why we are exhorted, "confess your sins to one another" (*James 5:16, NRSV*), meaning those we have wronged (*Matt. 18:15, 21, 22*). That is, if you have wronged or offended others, confess to them. Then the blessing of the Lord will rest upon you because the process of confession involves a dying to self, and only through that death to self can Christ be formed within you.

Models of Prayer

Read James 5:17, 18. What do we learn about prayer from Elijah's example? How is it connected with healing, forgiveness, and restoration?

These verses illustrate the assurance given at the end of James 5:16: "the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (*NASB*). Elijah was a "righteous" man and even translated to heaven, but he was not superhuman. He had the same passions and feelings that we have. The fact that God heard his prayer should encourage us that our prayers will be heard too. James says Elijah "prayed earnestly" that it might not rain (a detail not mentioned in the Old Testament), petitioning, apparently, for the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 11:13–17 (alluded to in James 5:18).

Israel's worship of Baal, the god of storm and lightning, could not go unchallenged on the basis of this prophecy in Deuteronomy. Though we do not know how long Elijah prayed before his prayers were answered, his petitions were based on careful study of, and reflection upon, God's Word in light of his present circumstances. It may be that he quoted Deuteronomy's prophecy as part of his prayer, just as Daniel's prayer for Jerusalem is based on his study of Jeremiah's prophecy (*see Dan. 9:2, 3*). Our prayers, too, will be more effective when they spring from thoughtful consideration of our circumstances in light of God's Word.

The period of no rain lasting three and a half years (also mentioned in Luke 4:25) is a significant time of probation in Scripture (like the prophetic period of "half a week," or three and a half years of Jesus' ministry in Daniel 9:27, and the "three and a half times" of apostasy in Christianity in Daniel 7:25 and Revelation 12:14). At the end of this period, God used Elijah to begin a work of revival and reformation to wake up Israel so that the people would recognize the depths of their apostasy. It was a work that typified both the work John the Baptist would do for first-century Israel in order to prepare the way for Christ's first advent and the work that God has entrusted to His remnant church today to prepare people for the Second Advent (*see Mal. 4:5, 6; Matt. 11:13, 14*).

As a church, we are seeking revival and reformation. But it must begin in our own lives, with our own selves, on a personal and daily basis. What choices can only you, yourself, make that will determine the direction and, ultimately, the destiny of your life?

Restoration and Forgiveness

God's Spirit worked through Elijah to restore the relationship between Israel and Himself. But most of Elijah's work was not on Mount Carmel. That was just the beginning! He carried it forward in small villages and homes and in training future spiritual leaders through the schools of the prophets to multiply his work of revival and reform.

Read James 5:19, 20. How does the work described here compare with the work done by Elijah, John the Baptist, and others? See Luke 1:16, 17; Acts 3:19.

Often, we forget the tender and patient work done by Elijah year after year. John the Baptist's work, too, focused on leading people back to the truth, inspiring repentance and baptism one person at a time. Jesus described His work in very similar terms: leading people out of error and back to the truth (see *John 8:43–45*).

This hypothetical situation described in James 5:19, 20 uses a conditional construction in Greek, making clear that apostasy is not definitely assumed to exist but is probable. Departure from the truth refers to apostasy not only in doctrine but in lifestyle, for very often the first leads to the second. Doubts begin to form about our beliefs, leading to double-minded behavior, and finally to outright apostasy. Turning back a "sinner from the wandering of his way will save his soul from death" (*James 5:20, literally translated*). Summing up all that has gone before, James appeals for his brothers in the church to do a work similar to that of Elijah in leading people back to God.

This work requires much patience, sympathy, tenderness, and humility: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (*Gal. 6:1, NIV*). The work of Elijah is to turn hearts toward God and His people, not to turn them away. Often the person is well aware of his or her sin and does not need it pointed out. What is needed more is forgiveness modeled by Jesus and provided by His death. Saving souls from death is possible only through the "covering" of sins, by applying the gospel to our lives, and becoming instruments of mercy (*Prov. 10:12*).

Think of someone who has really done wrong and knows it too. What can you do, what can you say, to help draw this person back toward the Lord?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Prayer for the Sick,” pp. 225–233, in *The Ministry of Healing*; “Snares of Satan,” pp. 518–523, in *The Great Controversy*.

“Christ . . . asks us to become one with Him for the saving of humanity. ‘Freely ye have received,’ He says, ‘freely give.’ Matt. 10:8. Sin is the greatest of all evils, and it is ours to pity and help the sinner. There are many who err, and who feel their shame and their folly. They are hungry for words of encouragement. They look upon their mistakes and errors, until they are driven almost to desperation. These souls we are not to neglect. . . .

“Speak words of faith and courage that will be as a healing balsam to the bruised and wounded one.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 504.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think of a time when you really made a mess of things, hurting yourself, others, and the Lord by your sin. How much did it mean to you to have people who, although not condoning your actions (and who might have generally and rightly been appalled by them), nevertheless sought to encourage and uplift you? What do you remember most about those experiences, and how can those remembrances help you do the same for someone else who has made big mistakes, as well?
- 2 Read James 5:16 prayerfully and carefully. What important spiritual lessons are here for us? What does this tell us about the power of prayer and how important it is for our spiritual lives? Though prayer can and should be a very private matter, in class talk about what prayer does for you, how you have seen prayers answered, and how you have learned to trust the Lord when prayers aren’t answered as you wish. In the end, what would you say is the most important practical benefit that comes from “effectual fervent prayer”?

Under Arrest! Part 1

GIOVANNI ZALDIVAR

My pastor was planning to hold evangelistic meetings. He printed some invitation cards for members to give to their friends to remind them of the meetings. He urged everyone to invite their families, friends, and neighbors, and we young people of the church wanted to be included.

At that time Cuba's government was more strict about religion than it is now. People could attend church and worship God, but the government didn't want churches trying to convert people to their faith.

On Sabbath afternoon, while our parents were in choir practice, four girls and I decided to give out invitations to the meetings. We walked a few blocks down a side street, giving invitation cards to the people we passed or to those who sat on their tiny porches. Encouraged when the people accepted the cards, we decided to give out cards in the children's park a few blocks farther away.

One man sitting on a bench watched us talking to people and giving them cards. The man called us over to where he was sitting and asked what we were giving out. I gave him an invitation card and invited him to come to the meetings. He looked at the card for a minute, then told us, "It's against the law to give out religious literature in Cuba. Where are your parents?"

"They are in church, a few blocks from here," I answered.

"I am going to have to arrest you," the man said as he stood up. Then I noticed that he was wearing a military uniform.

"You can't arrest us," I told him. "President Castro said that we have religious freedom in Cuba."

"Let's go to the police office over there," the man said, pointing toward a small building on the edge of the park. So we followed the officer to a small building, where the man made a telephone call. "We'll wait here for the police to come and take you to jail," he told us.

We asked the officer several times to let us talk with our parents, but the officer didn't respond. To bolster our courage, we began singing "Side by side we stand." As our courage grew, we sang louder, so the people walking by could hear us.

Then I saw a woman from the church walking by, and I called out to her. I explained that the officer had arrested us for giving out invitation cards and asked her to please tell our parents back at church what had happened. The woman returned to the church to tell our parents. Soon a police officer arrived and took us to a youth detention center. We began to wonder what would happen to us. Would our parents find us?

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