how to PRAY for the SICK

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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).

I grew up in a doctor's home.

My father was a surgeon, and my mother was a nurse (they met while doing medical service in the army during World War II). My uncle was a surgeon, and my three brothers are all medical doctors. Two of my cousins became doctors. Medicine hangs from every branch of my family tree, which is part of the reason I find the topic of praying for the sick so fascinating. At what point do medicine and prayer intersect? How should they work together to provide healing?

These are not theoretical questions.

Every prayer meeting includes a list of the sick. It might be someone with cancer, or it might be a child with some strange fever, or perhaps a friend was in a car wreck. It could be a church member who had a heart attack, or it might be someone struggling with chronic pain. That makes this topic very personal.

Let me state up front what the question is *not*:

- The question is not, Does God answer prayer? The answer is yes.
- The question is not, Does God answer prayer for the sick? The answer is also yes.
- The question is not, Does God sometimes answer in ways that seem miraculous?

Again, the answer is yes. I am happy to stipulate that all those things are true.

Furthermore, the focus is not on what God can do. After all, we know God can do anything he wants to do. Nothing is impossible with him. *Our focus is on what the church can do.* James 5:14-15 tells us how a Bible-believing church ought to respond to sickness in its midst. What should we do for the sick? The answer is simple and profound. *The church should pray for the sick that God would raise them up.*

When we pray for the sick, we are doing what God told us to do.

But that raises several questions. Let's start by considering a few preliminary facts.

A PLACE TO BEGIN

The Gospels record 41 separate healing miracles during Christ's ministry on earth. Matthew 4:23-24 tells us that people with various maladies were brought to Jesus from Galilee and Syria, and he healed them all. Some were blind, others deaf, some were demonized, some paralyzed, and still others were sick with various diseases. He healed them all. Jesus never failed to heal anyone who was brought to him. This means the total number of healing miracles must be far larger than the 41 specifically mentioned.

The situation changes as we move into the book of Acts. Some miracles of healing are recorded, but not very many. We read about Peter and John and the lame man in Acts 3, signs and wonders in Acts 2 and 5, Peter and Dorcas in Acts 9, and Paul and Eutychus in Acts 20. Healing receives relatively little mention because Dr. Luke (the beloved physician who wrote Acts) emphasized the spread of the gospel across the Roman Empire.

A brief survey of 2000 years of church history reveals that from the very beginning, Christians have believed in ministering to the

sick and the dying. The followers of Jesus have started missionary clinics, hospitals, sanitariums, rest homes, leprosariums, pharmacies, and medical schools, and we have worked to provide clean food and water for those without it. From Chittagong to Galmi and from Seoul to Asuncion, Christians have prayed and given and sacrificed to help the suffering in the name of Jesus.

In recent years many churches have put renewed emphasis on the importance of praying for the sick. It's also fair to say that in some circles there has been ambivalence on this subject. Some people are frightened of the perceived excesses of others (I'm thinking of certain flamboyant practices of the "healing evangelists" on late-night Christian television). Perhaps we are embarrassed by the possibility of failure. Above all, we don't want to lose our focus on the gospel as our central message.

All these concerns are quite valid. And yet if you ask around, it's evident God can and sometimes does work miracles in answer to prayer. We all have a story to tell in this regard. My story goes back to the church I pastored in Garland, Texas. One day a woman named Libby asked if the elders would anoint her with oil and pray over her as taught in James 5. No one had ever asked me to do that before, and I didn't know what to say. The elders didn't have any experience in this area either, but they agreed we should do it. I went to the grocery store and bought a jar of olive oil. It just seemed like the right thing to do. After the worship service on Sunday morning, Libby and the elders gathered in my office. I read James 5:13-16 and asked Libby to tell us what we should pray for. Years earlier, she had had one of the first open-heart surgeries in Texas. Evidently her arteries were in terrible shape because the doctor said they were like chalk and would snap if he tried to operate again. Tests showed that Libby had developed a life-threatening blockage in her lower abdomen. Surgery was scheduled for the following Tuesday.

After asking Libby if she had any sins she wished to confess, I dipped my finger in the oil and made the sign of the cross on her forehead. The elders laid their hands on her, and one by one, we prayed earnestly that God might heal her. As we began to pray, "something" happened I can't fully explain. All of us were aware of the powerful presence of God in the room. When we finished, Libby had a big smile on her face, and we all knew God had met with us as we prayed. The next day Libby had pre-surgery tests. On Tuesday she called with an amazing report. The surgery had been canceled because the tests revealed the

blockage had disappeared. She was giddy with excitement when she told me the good news. I have never doubted that God healed her in answer to our prayers.

When I told that story in a sermon a few years ago, Dr. Mark Bailey, president of Dallas Seminary, asked me if I had other stories like that. A few, I replied, but not many, and nothing as dramatic as that. Looking back over the years, I can recall numerous occasions when I have prayed for someone, and they have gotten better. Yet there have also been times when prayers have been offered, and no improvement could be detected. Dr. Bailey and I agreed that this is the experience of most pastors. From time to time, it seems as if God is pleased to grant an amazing deliverance that appears to come solely through prayer. Why doesn't that happen all the time? We don't know. But we do know God has given us clear instructions about praying for the sick.

With that in mind, let's take a closer look at what James 5:14-15 says.

A FOUR-STEP PROCESS

If we look at this passage carefully, we discover that it mentions four steps in the process of praying for the sick.

STEP 1: THE SICK PERSON CALLS FOR THE ELDERS

"Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him" (James 5:14). The process begins when the sick person calls for the elders to come to him. The word "sick" includes any serious physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual problem that has become too heavy to bear. There are many kinds of sickness, and when a believer is overwhelmed, he should feel free to call the elders to come to him.

Who are the "elders" of the church? The term refers to the spiritual leaders of the congregation. Taken in its broadest sense, the term refers to any group of godly Christians who have a concern for the sick. *The sick person is unable to come to the church, so the church comes to him.* And he may be too sick to pray for himself, so the church comes to pray for him. Sometimes the sick person will be mentally unable to sustain coherent thoughts. Chemotherapy or other drugs may have sapped all mental and physical energy and left him somewhat disoriented. The pain may be so great that prayer becomes a burden. The patient may be in a coma or may drift in and out of consciousness. Those who are healthy can perform a great service for

the sick by praying for them. This is an example of the strong bearing the burdens of the weak.

A friend going through a hard time mentioned how much the prayers of others had meant: “Nothing helps us more than knowing we’re being prayed for. That has made all the difference.” It’s good to bring over a meal, help with the kids, or run errands. Those things make a difference, but nothing matters more than prayer. It’s the most practical thing we can do for our friends.

Why call the elders? *First,* because the elders represent the church. Instead of having the whole church come, the church can be represented by the elders. *Second,* the elders are preeminently to be men of prayer. Faithful elders know how to get in touch with God.

STEP 2: THE ELDERS GO TO THE SICK PERSON

This step follows from the first. The elders go wherever the sick person is. *They go together because there is strength in numbers.* Praying in person makes their prayers much more fervent, heartfelt, and earnest. Their presence encourages the sick person with the message that “the church has not forgotten you.” Since elders lead by example, they show the whole congregation how to care for the sick in their midst.

As I read James 5:14, I picture a scene where the person is too sick to sit up, so the elders gather around the bed, lift up holy hands, and literally pray over the sick person.

STEP 3: THE ELDERS PRAY AND ANOINT WITH OIL

“He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14). When the elders come to pray for the sick person, they are to anoint him with oil. The word literally means to rub oil on him, almost like a massage. The kind of oil is not identified, but we can be sure it does not refer to motor oil. Most likely the reference is to olive oil, since that was widely used in the first century. But the precise kind of oil doesn’t matter. Some missionary friends asked their church in Nigeria to send the elders to pray over their son who was very sick and seemed to be getting worse. The elders and the pastor came to the home and asked the missionaries for some oil. The only oil they had was peanut oil, so that is what the elders used. That very day, the young boy began to get better.

In the Bible, oil was often used as a symbol of health and vitality from the Lord. Kings were anointed with oil as a visible symbol of God’s

presence and the need for his blessing. The same is true in James 5. The oil isn't magical. There is no supernatural power in a few drops (or a few cups, for that matter) of oil—olive, peanut, or any other kind. *The oil is a simple aid to faith.* It reminds us that all healing comes from God. In this sense, the oil is like the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. It builds faith and says to the sick person, "God is here, and he is able to heal you." Sometimes I have done this sort of praying in a hospital room where the sick person is wired up to all sorts of high-tech monitors. The simple act of anointing with oil reminds all of us—the sick person and the ones doing the praying—that it is the Lord who heals. Our trust is not in technology (as good as it is) but in God alone.

The anointing is to be done "in the name of the Lord." This is all-important because it reminds us God is the ultimate source of all blessing and all healing. When people ask, "Do you believe in divine healing?" I tell them, "That's the only kind there is. It just comes in many different varieties."

There is no power in the elders.

There is no power in the oil.

But there is enormous power, omnipotent power, eternal power, in the name of the Lord. He alone can grant the needed healing.

STEP 4: THERE IS HEALING AND FORGIVENESS

The fourth step is described in James 5:15: "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." This step is simply the expected result of steps 1–3: The sick person is healed, and his sins are forgiven. James uses an unusual phrase to describe the prayer. He calls it "the prayer offered in faith." This phrase is used nowhere else in the New Testament. In one sense, every sincere prayer must be offered in faith, or it can hardly be called prayer at all. When the elders pray, they are to come to God with an attitude of complete trust that he will do what is needed in every situation.

The text says nothing about how the healing will come. It doesn't demand miraculous or instantaneous healing. Nor does the healing in view rule out the use of medical care. Whether quickly or slowly, by miracle or by medicine, or by some combination of the two, God can heal his children. Alec Motyer puts it this way:

> There is no such thing as (so to speak) 'non-spiritual' healing. When the aspirin works, it is the Lord who has made it work; when the surgeon sets the broken limb and the bone knits, it is the Lord who has made it knit. *Every* good gift is from above! *(The Message of James,* p. 193*)*

Verse 15 suggests a close relationship between the physical and the spiritual. The Greek construction of the "if" clause implies that sin may be involved in the sickness. Not all sickness is caused by a particular sin, but some illnesses stem directly from our sinful actions and attitudes. *Until those things are confronted and confessed, it is pointless to pray for healing.* Whenever I am asked to anoint the sick with oil, I always inquire as to their spiritual condition. I want to know if they are conscious of any sin standing between them and God, blocking his healing power. Sometimes they make a confession, sometimes they don't. But we must ask the question in every case. In rare situations I may refuse to pray for healing or to anoint with oil if I sense the sick person has a hardened heart or a rebellious spirit. In that case, to pray for healing might oppose God's work of divine chastisement that is intended to bring the sick person to a place of personal repentance.

James 5:15 says the prayer offered in faith "will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up." For many of us, that seems too confident and too dogmatic. James states without any qualification the sick person will be healed. We would prefer the verse to say that "the prayer of faith may save the sick." *After all, most of us have prayed for people who got worse instead of better.* I recall a dear friend of mine who fervently believed God was going to heal him of cancer as a testimony to the world of God's power. Up until the very day of surgery, he proclaimed his belief to everyone he met. Multitudes of people poured their hearts out to God on his behalf. Two weeks after the surgery, I officiated at his funeral service.

A PROPER PERSPECTIVE

Not everyone we pray for is healed in the literal, physical sense. There are various ways of dealing with this reality, and none of them satisfy me completely. There is a mystery here I cannot fully explain. It helps to compare this passage with other statements about prayer in the New Testament where similar sweeping promises are made. Those statements are meant to encourage us about the boundless possibilities of prayer. *They remind us that no situation is hopeless for God.* Just because the doctors have given up doesn't mean the Great Physician has given up.

How, then, should we pray for the sick? Seven words come to mind. We should pray ...

- **Aggressively** because nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37).
- **Fervently** because the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective (James 5:16).
- **Unitedly** because our faith grows stronger as we pray together (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
- **Confidently** knowing that we have a High Priest who invites us to come to the throne of grace where we can find grace and mercy in the time of need (Hebrews 4:16).
- **Repeatedly** because God invites us to ask, ask, and keep on asking (Matthew 7:7-8).
- **Gratefully** because we have already received "grace upon grace," far more than we deserve (John 1:16).
- **Submissively** because God's understanding of the total situation is much greater than ours (Matthew 6:10).

Most of us think of healing as "getting rid of the disease." It's like running the clock of life backward and restoring the person to their previous state. *But in the Bible, healing means coming into a right relationship with God first and foremost.* Then it touches every part of life—body, soul, and spirit. It brings us to a place where we can receive God's blessings in a new and powerful way. That goes far beyond "Pray for my son because he broke his arm in football practice." Healing is not going back to what we were before, but going on to all God wants us to be. Think about that for a moment. When we pray for healing, we dare not focus on the physical to the exclusion of the spiritual, emotional, and relational facets of life. We are not healed until we are made whole on every level of our existence.

To say it another way, what's the point of being healed physically if we end up just as crabby as we were before? If we're still greedy or still impatient or still harbor a critical spirit, the miracle has been wasted on us. If we dwell on our resentments, even after God delivers us from cancer, what have we gained? We need healing that works both ways—from the outside in and from the inside out.

I received an email from a man whose daughter was diagnosed with brain cancer. After outlining her course of treatment and thanking his friends for their prayers, he said very simply: "Keep it up—we believe in a miracle-working God." He signed his letter, "Teary-eyed but believing good things are ahead."

That's the right balance. That's how Christians talk when facing a medical emergency.

> You get the best medical help you can.
>
> You face reality squarely.
>
> You ask your friends to pray.
>
> You remind yourself and others that we believe in a miracle-working God.

And you keep believing, even though the "good things" that are ahead may come in heaven, not on earth.

WANTED: MEN OF PRAYER

As I survey James 5:14-15 in light of the whole Bible, the following two statements seem absolutely true to me:

- It is not always God's will to heal physically, or no sick believer would ever die.
- It is often God's will to heal, or James 5:14-15 would not be in the Bible.

Sometimes we focus on one statement to the exclusion of the other, but both seem entirely true to me. Part of our problem is that we have lost our faith in 1) God's will to heal, and 2) the role of the elders in the healing process. God has made four provisions for sick believers:

- The caring community of faith—the church
- Loving family and friends
- Doctors, nurses, hospitals, and medicine
- Godly elders who pray for the sick

We have robbed the sick of that last provision. *But it is still in the Bible.* Sometimes we overlook the basic need of prayer. We send cards, flowers, and candy. We offer babysitting, and we prepare meals for the sick. We are ready to run errands. This is all good and proper and a wonderful expression of our faith. But the sick need our prayers more than they need anything else. We must start with prayer and let everything else be added to it. We can say it this way:

All believers ought to pray for the sick.

Praying for the sick is the special duty and privilege of the elders of the church.

This tells us what kind of men the elders should be: *godly men of prayer.* If they are not men of prayer away from the bedside, they will do little to help the sick and dying. For their prayers to make a difference, they must be men of vital, living faith, ready to pray even in desperate circumstances.

RESTORING A NOBLE MINISTRY

Praying for the sick should be the normal work of the church. We must restore this noble ministry in our day. Perhaps we would see God's power manifest in greater ways if we dared to believe and obey his Word. At the same time, we must let God be God. With that in mind, here are seven principles that will help us as we pray.

1. Since God is sovereign, we cannot know in advance what the outcome of our prayers will be. Therefore, we should pray with humility, not making promises we can't keep. God is God and we are not. We must keep this perspective before us while we pray for the sick.

2. Since God is omnipotent, we should expect him to answer our prayers, sometimes in ways we cannot explain. Therefore, we should pray boldly and ask God for the healing we seek. Sometimes while visiting the sick, we may feel intimidated by the gravity of the situation. But if we have our eyes upon God, we will not fear to ask him to heal his children.

3. Since God invites us to pray, we should pray fervently for what we need. James 5:16 says the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective. To borrow a phrase from an older version, they "avail much" with God. He pays attention to fervent prayers. The Greek word for "fervent" can mean "boiling." Do you know what a "boiling" prayer is? You'll discover what that means when the doctor says, "We're taking your daughter away for surgery." When they wheel her away, you'll pray a "boiling" prayer. Nothing can distract you then. Praying like this speaks of total concentration. Better a short prayer from the heart than a long prayer that puts you to sleep.

4. Since everything God creates is good, we should view both prayer and medicine as gifts to help us when we are sick. God doesn't ask us to choose between prayer and medicine. Pray, and take your pills to the glory of God. Seek the Lord when you are weak and ask for his help. And do not despise his help if it comes in the form of surgery or chemotherapy.

5. Since God knows what is best, we must believe that when healing does not come, it is for our good and his glory. This is nothing more than a summary of what Romans 8:28 teaches. Sometimes we will see this very clearly, and other times we must choose to believe it by faith. But it is still true whether we fully understand it or not.

6. Since sin may block God's healing power, we should ask about a person's spiritual state before we pray for them. Compassionate elders will know how to deal wisely with the sheep entrusted to their care. We need to ask, "Are you aware of anything in your life that may have brought this sickness upon you or is hindering God's healing power?" When the answer is yes, we can deal with that issue as part of the whole healing process.

7. Since God's Word is true, we glorify him when we obey his Word, regardless of the outcome. We are to obey what we know and then leave the results with him.

PARTIAL AND TEMPORARY

One final word needs to be said. *All healing in this life is partial and temporary.* Ultimate healing will not come until the dead in Christ are raised when Jesus comes again (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Sometimes we speak of believers who died after a long illness as having been healed in heaven. But the Bible doesn't say it that way. Those who die in Christ are with him in heaven from the moment of their earthly death (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). It's also true their sufferings are over forever. But we won't be completely healed until our mortal bodies put on immortality in the resurrection when Christ returns (1 Corinthians 15:52-54). Biblical salvation includes the redemption of the body, not just the redemption of the soul in heaven.

As I write these words, I'm thinking of my friend Gary Olson, who died in 1999. I know he is in heaven, I know his suffering is over, and I know he is in a state of perfect heavenly joy. Is he in a better place? Yes. Has he been healed? Not completely. Not as long as his mortal remains are still buried in the ground. I will not be satisfied until I see him once again, hear his hearty laugh, and feel him put his arm on my shoulder and say with his deep voice, "Pastor Ray, how are you doing?" Dreams are fine and memories are sweet, but nothing can take the place of seeing our loved ones who have been raised immortal and incorruptible, never to die again.

If I think of it that way, then the question of physical healing comes into proper focus. Can God heal the sick? Yes. Does he? All the time. Does God sometimes move from heaven to deliver someone from a desperate illness? Yes, and it happens more often than we know. *We should rejoice in every healing, no matter how large or small it seems to us.* But let's remember that everyone healed in this life will die eventually. Death still reigns on planet earth.

It's almost as if God is saying, "So you're impressed with what I can do about cancer? Just wait till you see what I can do with a dead person." All physical healing is like a tiny down payment, a deposit, a tantalizing foretaste, a guarantee of greater miracles to come. When I think of my friends who have gone to heaven, I want to say, "Lord Jesus, come back today. Empty the graveyards, and let the celebration begin!"

OUR PART, GOD'S PART

Why are some prayers for healing answered and some not? No one answer can fully explain God's purposes, but I am content with the words of Psalm 115:3: "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him." I can state my own theology of prayer for healing in one sentence: *We do the praying, and God does the healing—in his own time, in his own way, according to his own will.* We are to pray earnestly, fervently, unitedly, repeatedly, obediently, and with all the faith God gives us. If we do our part, God cannot fail to do his.

I come to the end of this message with great joy in my heart, even as I bow before a God whose ways are far beyond my meager understanding. Through prayer, we have the privilege of lifting the burden from our brothers and sisters. Through prayer, we may become agents of healing to those who are sick. What an honor to be used of God in this way!

Let's pray boldly, confidently, humbly, believing that as we pray for the sick and dying, God hears, he cares, and he will do what is best in every situation. When we pray for the sick, we are doing the work of Jesus in the world.

Fear not, keep believing, and keep on praying.

GOING DEEPER

1. What is the significance of anointing “in the name of the Lord”?

2. “Healing is not going back to what we were before, but going on to all God wants us to be.” What does this statement mean?

3. In what sense is all earthly healing partial and temporary?

4. What is the connection between sin and sickness?

5. How can we recover the ministry of praying for the sick in the local church?

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