

The God of Elijah James 5.13-20

1 Kgs 17.17-24

John 9.1-7

Context

James has just written calling his readers to patience in suffering as await the Lord's Return, holding up the prophets and Job as shining examples.

How do they wait patiently – in prayer (7x) AND care for one another

In all circumstances – suffering, cheerfulness, sickness – should be turning to God in prayer and praise.

Motyer:

Our whole life... should be so angled towards God that whatever strikes upon us, whether sorrow or joy, should be deflected upwards at once into his presence.

These are churches in which a range of besetting sins have been noted – 1.19; 2.1-13; 3.14-17; 4.1-12, 13-17; 5.1-6, 12.

Has also been noted that sin leads to division and even violence in the community, and finally to death (1.15), with a warning that to think otherwise is to be deceived (1.16).

As await the Lord's return, face various circumstances:

v.13 – speaks of suffering produced by hardship. Very broad, covering trials of all kinds.

Think of prophets to whom he has just referred:

- Jeremiah suffered opposition
- Ezekiel bereavement
- Hosea marital breakdown

Given that elsewhere James has encouraged believers to endure suffering faithful to God, (1.2-4, 12; 5.7-11) whose purposes are being worked out, it is most likely that the prayer called for here is for strength to endure.

Cf. Jesus' prayer for his disciples in Jn 17.15 "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."

2nd circumstance = cheerful. Not just when things going well, let alone 'happy/jolly/smiley-face', but 'in good spirits'. Cf. Paul urging the sailors in Acts 27.22, 25 "keep up your courage".

Cf. too Latimer's encouragement to Ridley while burning at the stake:

Be of good cheer, Master Ridley play the man. We shall this day by God's grace light such a candle in England as shall never be put out."

Good spirits = an attitude, and praise generates good spirits.

v.14 – 3rd circumstance: 'sick' (physical illness)

- assumption is that too sick to go to the elders, i.e. bedridden.
- He must take the initiative and *call* the elders.

"Elders": older (wiser, mature) members of the church, or official office of Elder (as possibly in Acts 20.17 and almost certainly in 1 Peter 5.1). Witherington Cf. Elder of the Synagogue (an official of the local assembly).

Regardless, some sort of leadership role is indicated.

- to both pray and anoint with oil. Only other reference to this is in Mark 6.13 (mission of the 12)
McKnight: "... an act of devoting it to God for God's work of healing."
No magical properties to oil.

BUT NB, this is not the only way/last word re healing:

- No mention of laying on of hands.
- No mention of the effectiveness of the faith of the sick man.
- No mention of the healing being conditional upon his confessing his sin. Forgiveness seems to be simply an added mercy/act of grace, which follows/accompanies the healing.
- No mention of a spiritual gift of healing: rather BUT the elders pray and anoint, and God works.

"Raise up" – from sick bed, i.e. total instant healing - as in Mk 1.31 (Peter's mother-in-law) and Mk 5.41 "He took her by the hand and said to her, 'talitha cum,' which means, 'Little girl, get up.'"

McKnight: The fact is that the earliest Christians believed God could and did heal, and they prayed for healing in a number of ways, not the least of which was the summoning of elders to anoint the sick person.

v.15 – “the prayer of faith” cf. 1.5-6 – unwavering faith. Believes something specific will happen.

Healing is linked strongly to faith – see Mark 2.5; 5.34, 36; 9.23; 10.52; Acts 14.9 (Paul saw that the cripple at Lystra “had faith to be healed”).

On the face of it, James says God will always heal in response to the prayer of a righteous man in faith. See too John 14.13 “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it” – though note spoken to the twelve, not all disciples.

Need to be honest about not all being healed. Cf.:

- Paul’s own denial of healing from “thorn in flesh” – 2 Cor 12.7-9
- Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus (Titus 3.20)
- Jesus had to suffer and die...

Need to approach in humility and trust, insisting on his will, not ours.

Without faith, unlikely to be healing. But even with faith, not always healing.

Sosei – refers to the physical healing of the sick person, as it does often in the Gospels (Matt 9.21f.; 10.28; 25.36, 39; Mark 3.4; 5.23, 28, 34; 6.56; 10.52; Luke 4.40; 7.50; 8.48, 50; 17.19; 18.42; John 4.46; 5.3, 7; 6.2; 11.1, 2, 3, 6, 12); at the same time as implying more than just physical healing (though not less – see Luke 17.19 in particular, comparing vv. 19 and v.17).

While the prayer of faith is essential, nevertheless it is the Lord who does the healing – it is he who will raise them up.

Recognise that he doesn’t always choose to do so, but must have faith that he can.

15b. SICKNESS - SIN

In the OT a fairly clear assumption that sickness was punishment for sin. Enhanced by the curses and blessings in Deut 27-28, but challenged by the story of Job, who was the most righteous man on Earth.

In the NT the link between sin and sickness is particular rather than universal: sometimes there is a link (at least implied, e.g. Jn 5.14; Mark 2.1-12; 1 Cor 11.27-30), other times not (Luke 13.1-5; Jn 9.1-3).

James implies both possible: “*if* he has sinned”, i.e. God will grant full restoration – physical and spiritual.

v.16

Now seems to be moving on to talking generally:

- Confession is good for the soul of the whole community, and all in it.
- The only verse in the NT which commands *mutual* confession, i.e. to one another. Presumably sins already indicated in the Diaspora communities are in view. Reconciliation is needed – 3.18 “A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

James looks for a spirit of reconciliation and prayer.

McKnight points out that “the command to confess, so foreign to much of the church today, characterized the life of ancient Israel.” See Lev 5.5-6; 16.21; 26.40; Ezra 10. Also Ps 32.5; 51.3-4.

As in Isa 6.10, “turning” (i.e. repentance) leads to healing.

In NT, Acts 19.18 “Also many of those who became believers confessed and disclosed their practices” (i.e. magic)

1 John 1.8-9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just...”

The *Didache* furnishes evidence that was a common practice in the Early Church – Didache 4.14.

In Church you shall confess your transgressions, and you shall not approach your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life.”

– No priestly role envisaged in confession. Does not even have to be to the elders; rather, the instruction is to confess “to one another.”

No doubt what James has in mind are the kind of sins which have hurt and divided these diaspora churches – partiality, ambition, violence, judgmentalism, greed, oppression.

Confession is most likely to the one you have hurt, who forgives you and then prays for you.

vv. 17-18

Elijah was a person, literally of “like passions/feelings” – or with the simpler sense of “like nature” (Witherington).

- Implication is that James doesn’t want us to be discouraged by the “righteous” qualifier.

Paul and Barnabas said the same of themselves when the people of Lystra wanted to hail them as gods – Acts 14.15.

Elijah wasn’t perfect:

- Could be fearful and flee (1 Kgs 19.3)
- Fell into deep despair and depression (1 Kgs 19.4)
- Could be filled with self-pity (1 Kgs 19.10)

But point was that even in despair, Elijah prayed (even if it was only that he might die!). As Motyer points out, the only prayer not answered. Elijah not only didn’t die then, he never died (2 Kgs 2.11)!

Elijah was a great man of prayer, and it was the effectiveness of prayer that was at the centre of his greatest contest (1 Kgs 18.20ff.): whose prayers would be answered – his or the prophets of Baal’s?

Elijah demonstrated that prayer overrides even the natural order (weather, food not running out, life from death etc.)

Only 2 recorded prayers:

- 1 Kgs 18.36-37
- 1 Kgs 19.4 prayed that he might die

His prayers are simple and brief and to the point.

James is not talking about super-saints, but ordinary believers.

YET is a sense that elders = referred to as ‘righteous’ in a way the general congregation may not be – i.e. mature in faith.

- Righteous people can prevail with God.
- Righteous people will pray in accord with God’s will, knowing his mind

v.19-20

Not the normal way of ending a letter (greetings and benedictions) but a call to one more action.

Have been told to care for the sick, and to care for the community (in terms of reconciliation). Now told to care for the wanderers.

In Heb 13.17 leaders are recorded as having to “keep watch over your souls”.

Both doctrinal and ethical wandering (from the truth). The person whose life has become entangled with sin. Behaviour derives from belief, so the two are inseparable. Titus 1.1 “the knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness”.

The death mentioned is not just mortal but eternal death – *Thanatos*

Cf. Jude 21-24

Keep yourselves in the love of God... and have mercy on some who are wavering; have others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by the flesh.

“Cover” has sense of overshadow or outweigh, rather than atone for – cf. 2.13 “mercy triumphs over judgment”,

Prov 10.12 “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offences.”

1 Peter 4.8 “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.”

It is most likely that it is the sins of the one who rescues the wanderer which are covered. He is the one who has shown the love (which triumphs over judgment).

Cf. 1 Tim 4.16 where Paul tells Timothy to pay attention to himself (i.e. Timothy) and his teaching, “for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

Cf. Ezekiel 3.16-21 where Ezekiel is told that if he does not warn the wicked then they will die, but his life will be taken also; but if he does warn them, then even if they will not repent, he will save himself.

Conclusion

These final two verses may well be understood as a summary of what James considers he is doing in writing this letter – “bringing back” (to the truth) these diaspora Christians.

James writes to instruct church on how to be body of Christ, living faithfully as await the Day of Jesus’ return.

Not just hearers but doers – so let us be the same. Pray for healing.

Prayer:

- In all circumstances . 1 Thess 5.16-18 “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
- Powerful and effective
- Pastoral
- Simple

Where is the God of Elijah? – from Don Cormack *Killing Fields, Living Fields*

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe your prayer life? Do you set aside a regular time each day? Do you have a set format? Do you draw on any written or other resources?
2. When do you find it easiest, and when hardest to pray? What are the greatest challenges for you?
3. Have you ever gone through a “dark night of the soul” when you found it hard to pray, or the heavens simply seemed brassy? How did you come through it?
4. What is your experience of God’s healing – either of yourself or someone else?
5. How do you cope when you pray for someone and they are not healed?
6. What does it mean to “bring back a sinner from his wandering?” Have you ever done that? If so, how?