

The Prayer of Faith – Part 1

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – James urges believers to seek God in prayer to strengthen faith in every circumstance
2. aim – to cause us to earnestly seek the Lord in prayer as a means of strengthening our faith
3. passage – James 5:13-20

b. outline

1. The Prayer of Faith (James 5:13-15)
2. The Prayer of Confession (James 5:16-18)
3. The Prayer of Restoration (James 5:19-20)

c. opening

1. the **final act** of the letter
 - a. although the *suggestion* at the beginning of this series through James is that it would take up to two (2) years to complete, coming to the last eight (8) verses clearly means *it will not*
 - b. however, given what has taken place around us this year, it certainly **seems like two years!!**
 1. **jokingly:** “Lord, I’ll preach through James if you’ll provide the backdrop to make it relevant”
2. the **epilogue** of the letter
 - a. a final set of verses designed to give some *practical* advice on how to implement the main point
 - b. **note:** the letter just seems to “end” (rather abruptly) – there is no final salutation, as in Paul’s *encyclicals* where he sends a final greeting of grace and peace (**e.g. Ephesians 6:23f**)
 1. **aside:** since it is *typically* the beginnings and endings of ancient letters (written on fragile substrates like papyrus) that are often worn over time, it is *possible* the ending “frayed off”
 - c. so, the final eight (8) verses in this letter act as an *epilogue*: a “wrap-up” of the main point

I. The Prayer of Faith (James 5:13-15)

Content

a. the structure of the imperatives

1. **read these verses** and see the structure inherent within it (**with emphasis**)
 - a. a series of *rhetorical questions* designed to “pave the way” for a series of imperatives
 - b. **note:** rhetorical (in this sense) means that James is simply *assuming* there *are* some who are suffering, cheerful, or sick in the congregation – he asks the question to frame his imperative
 1. **i.e.** the question is actually an “if-then” clause: *if* any are (blank), *then* they should ...
2. **James is actually asking only one question in differing forms** – it is a question that gets fleshed out as he answers the *third in the set*:
 - a. the first and second are short and quickly answered – the third answer becomes the *true answer* for them all, *including even the first two*
 - b. **IOW:** James is focusing his attention *on a single subject and its attendant imperative*
 - c. **thesis: vv. 13-15 are a single question with a single answer, an answer which fits with the entire narrative of the letter, completing the thought of vv. 7-12**

b. the details of the imperatives

1. the first question: “*is anyone among you suffering?*” – note how this fits with **v. 10**
 - a. **answer:** “*let him pray*” (*proseuchomai*) = verb, present, imperative, third person, *middle voice*
 1. the imperative verb “pray” in the middle voice – “let him pray” or “I urge you to pray” (you should)
 - b. **note:** time does not permit an exhaustive analysis of prayer here, nor is it James’ intention – rather, it is important to note that (in this context) prayer is perceived **as an act of submission**
 1. to come before God is to *submit* to his authority as *God* – to admit to *him* that what he has ordained is both good and for our good *even if our request for relief goes unanswered*
2. the second question: “*is anyone cheerful?*” – the “flip-side” of the first question (its emotional opposite)
 - a. **answer:** “*let him sing praise*” (*psallō*) = the same verb form as “*let him pray*” (**see above**)
3. the third question: “*is anyone among you sick?*” – the *key question* from which the true answer flows
 - a. **answer:** “*let him call for*” (*proskaleō*) = the same verb form as “*let him pray*” (**see above**)
 - b. however, the verb (here) requires an object: call for *what?*
 1. and, it is the *object* (and the attendant *actions of that object*) which becomes the point:

c. the point of the imperatives

1. elders (*presbyteros*) = (along with *episkopēs*) a term used to denote the leadership of the church
 - a. translated *elder* or *overseer* (see **1 Tim. 3:1**) or *bishop* in the KJV = those who give spiritual oversight to the church body; a plurality of men of certain qualification that lead the congregation
 - b. **historical note:** James uses the term “*elders*” here in a letter dated to ~45AD, implying that the concept of eldership was already established in the church at that time (i.e. Paul’s qualification of the office in **1 Tim. 3** and **Titus 1** did not “establish” it then – it was already in place)
 1. i.e. elders were already well-known entities in both political and religious (Jewish) circles
 2. i.e. the office of deacon was *purposely* established by the apostles/elders in **Acts 6**
 3. so, although >75%? of Baptist churches now *eschew* the office of elder, *it was well-established in the church* all the way back to its inauguration (i.e. why single pastors and deacons only?)
2. “let them pray [over him]” = the same verb form as “let him pray” (see above)
 - a. **observational note:** James commands the *sick* to call the elders, not for the elders to “telepathically” know about whatever sickness you may have (e.g. **Hebron, 2001**)
 1. i.e. GFBC has assigned **every family on our roster an elder for watch-care**
3. “anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord”
 - a. **question:** does James mean to imply here that the elders of the church possess a power through which they can anoint you with oil and heal your illnesses? (if so, I’ve never seen it!!)
 1. **true:** there are always religious hucksters selling some form of “healing” substance
 2. **true:** the Roman Catholic sacrament of Extreme Unction (Last Rites) grew out of a medieval superstition (mysticism) justified by such passages (i.e. the dying having his sins forgiven by an anointing with oil by a priest)
 3. **but**, there is no hint throughout church history that such a power/substance exists
 4. **and**, to assume that is James’ teaching would *contradict* the specific idea posited in **v. 7**; that Christians are to be “*patient*” not until *healing*, but until the “*coming of the Lord*”
 - b. so, what might James be referring to here (i.e. is there a **better interpretation** of what he says)?
 1. **biblical truth:** the Persons of the Triune God *manifest themselves* (appear) in differing ways
 - a. the Father never appears *visibly* (**John 6:46**), but only *audibly* (**Matthew 3:17**)
 - b. and, the Son *only* appears in human form, in *incarnation* or in *theophany* (**Genesis 32**)
 - c. but, the Spirit appears in *non-corporeal* forms (e.g. wind, dove, tongues of fire, and oil)
 1. oil is *metaphorically* a “form” of the Spirit (i.e. anointing kings whereby the Spirit comes upon them; the oil burning in the golden lampstand to represent the presence of God; the tongues of flame representing the *illumination* that had now come upon the disciples)
 - d. so, could James be suggesting that an anointing with oil by the elders is actually **symbolic** of the true work of the elders in ministering to the “sick”?
 2. **ecclesiological question:** what is the *true* work of the elders?
 - a. **typical:** pastors are to be *primarily* concerned with physical well-being, both in *ministry* and in *preaching* that fosters care over the perceived “needs” of the flock (e.g. **Hebron, 2001**)
 - b. **truth:** although elders *are* concerned with the physical needs of the body, their *primary* concern is with the *spiritual health* of the congregation (i.e. contra the deacons)
 4. **point: what the sick (or suffering) believer needs is a word of revelation, of illumination, of exhortation within his or her circumstances that leads to greater faith (patience) through them**
 - a. **the power of the Spirit through the ordinary means of anointing, teaching and praying**

d. the conclusions of the imperatives (v. 15)

1. **question:** does the statement of **v. 15** support the idea of *physical healing*?
 - a. a **quick** reading of the verse *seems* to imply that a sick member can be healed through the prayer of the elders – so, James commands the sick to “*call for the elders*” for that reason
 1. “*save*”, “*raise him up*”, and “*be forgiven*” all seem to point to a healing of the sick person
 - b. but, a more **nuanced** reading implies things *very differently*, especially in the light of **v. 7**
2. “*save*” (*sōzō*) = heal; make well; rescue; save (**106x**; **89x**: “*save[d]*”; **15x**: “*healed*” or “*made well*”)
 - a. 14% refers to someone being *physically* healed (e.g. **Mt 9**; **Mk 6**; **Lk 8**; **Ac 14**)
 - b. 86% refers to someone being *spiritually* saved (e.g. **Mt 24:13**, “*the one who endures ... be saved*”)
 - c. **IOW:** the *preponderance* of usage strongly suggests that James is not referring to a *physical healing*, but to a *spiritual salvation* that comes as the believer is strengthened to *persevere in faith*
3. “*raise him up*” (*egeirō*) = to stand up; to wake up; to raise up; to lift up (**143x**)
 - a. 50% refers to someone being raised *from the bed*, 50% being raised *from the dead*
 - b. but, even in the cases where the word implies a *physical rising*, it is often *connected* to a spiritual component of salvation (e.g. Jesus’ healings were always about *spiritual realities*)
 - c. **IOW:** the word *strongly* connects to the **resurrection** intimated in the coming of the Lord in **v. 7**

4. “*be forgiven*” = being freed from the *consequences* of sin
 - a. yes, physical sickness is *sometimes* caused by the consequences of sin (directly or indirectly)
 - b. yet, Jesus himself “disconnected” the two to show that physical suffering is *often* designed to reflect the glory of God by his sovereign purpose to use it in us (**John 9:1-7**)
 5. **reality: it is very likely that James (here) is giving a command to the sick (and suffering) to submit to spiritual help through the elders and the ordinary means of grace they bring**
- e. the application of the imperatives**
1. **question:** so, what is the *general imperative* given in all three of these questions – what is the *single subject and its attendant imperative*?
 2. **answer:** regardless of your circumstances (suffering, cheerfulness, sickness), **the goal must be to grow in faith; to find strength in trusting Christ through the means he has provided**
 - a. “*let him pray*” – pray for *what?* = pray for greater strength of faith to endure the suffering
 - b. “*let him sing praises*” – praises for *what?* = praises that God has granted mercy, *and now is the time to prepare for the days of suffering and sickness that will come*
 - c. “*let him call*” – call for *what?* = call for the elders to bring a word of illumination from the Spirit that raises up faith in us to *look beyond our temporal pain to see Christ returning to save us*
- f. the usage of the imperatives (in church membership)**
1. **question:** how do you know who your elders are – who considers themselves your spiritual shepherd, and is ready to use the ordinary means of grace to help you through your suffering?
 2. **answer: church membership** – a *covenant* commitment to a church family *and to its leadership*, a willingness to place oneself under the **accountability** of a body established by Christ himself and led by men who are ready and qualified to help in all of life