OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Sickness and the Prayer of Faith

David Anguish

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven (Jas 5.14–15).

In a previous article, "The Trial of Sickness" (issue 3/12), we saw that the reference to sickness in James 5.14–15 is another example of his repeated emphasis on sustaining unwavering faith that endures life's storms. We considered the questions about exactly what James intended in these verses, suggested by the ambiguity of the terms for heal/save/restore (σῴζω, *sōzō*; ἰάομαι, *iaomai*), sickness/weakness (ἀσθενέω, *astheneō*; κάμνω, *kamnō*), and raise up (ἐγείρω, *egeirō*). We also called attention to the importance of determining who is commanded to act in verses 14–15, and to the way James weaves together the ideas of sin, confession, and forgiveness in the text. In view of our analysis, we concluded the following:

> The fact that trials in the form of life's misfortunes form the backdrop for James's letter leads us to conclude that the natural sense of physical illness and healing is James's primary point of reference in verses 14–15. But physical sickness can also be a specific source of spiritual crisis and thus a potential test for our loyalty in faith, which is the major theme of the epistle. James's use of terms that can be taken to refer to both physical and spiritual illness, along with his references to the spiritual community's involvement, indicate that he is continuing to focus on his exhortation to sustain an unwavering commitment of genuine faith.

With these foundational ideas in place, we turn to the matter of how "the prayer of faith" (v. 15) relates to the unwavering commitment of faith when we face the trial of sickness.

Copyright 2025 by David Anguish

"The Prayer of Faith" — Meaning

"The prayer of faith" is the crucial issue in verses 14–15, more so than sickness. But what exactly is "the prayer of faith"? The Greek phrase, ἡ εὐχὴ τῆς πίστεως (*hē euchē tēs pisteōs*), can have three possible meanings: (1) a "simple adjectival genitive," in which case it would mean "a prayer characterized by faith, a 'faithful prayer'"; (2) "a prayer generated by belief on the part of the ones praying that God answers prayer," that is, a faith that prayer is effective; or (3) "prayer that meets with faith in the one being prayed for" (McCartney 2009, 255). In view of the entirety of James, it is possible that all three ideas are intended, as McCartney observes:

> It may be unnecessary to decide among them. Because of the corporate nature of this prayer, the faith of the one prayed for and the faith of those praying are one, and the community's petition to God for healing is characterized by trust that God is the one who sovereignly acts on behalf of his people (McCartney 2009, 255).

If McCartney is correct, James is saying that because we ultimately trust God when we pray, that prayer is faithful; and because of the relationship with God that we share in common, the community, including those for whom prayer is offered, knows that prayer works. This relationship of complete trust and loyalty is the very definition of the faith that is exhibited by the ones who are praying.

"In the Name of the Lord"

A second important phrase is "in the name of the Lord" (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου, *en tō onomati tou kuriou*) in verse 14. This is not some sort of incantation that makes the thing wished for in the prayer happen, but refers rather to the authority that makes the urgent wish viable. The phrase points us back to the faith that "connects a person to God and characterizes a relationship with God" (McCartney 2009, 255). It is the relationship of trust that provides the context for the most urgent question about the prayer for the sick.

Assurance, not a Guarantee

But does James *guarantee* that "the prayer of faith" will always lead to physical healing? If he does, we must ask why many believers did not live longer than they did. We must also recognize that attributing such a guarantee to James puts 5.14–15 at odds with passages like 2 Corinthians 12.8–10 where Paul affirms that God's answer to his request for the removal of his "thorn in the flesh" was denied.

But that does not mean we are wrong to say that "the prayer of faith" *can* lead to physical healing. Jesus's healing of the paralytic in Mark 2.1–12 shows that at times such a request was granted. However, we would also hasten to add that being healed at one point in our life does not make us immune to illness and a fatal outcome in the future; Hezekiah is an instructive example in this regard (Isa 38).

Thus, our assurance regarding prayer does not come in the form of a guarantee that God will always cure us, but rather that he will care for us with ultimate restoration, regardless of the trials we endure. As Job learned, that is enough (Job 42.5–6).

Copyright 2025 by David Anguish

Conclusion

Jürgen Moltmann once wrote, "Faith means wanting and willing something with all our hearts" (Moltmann 1997, 139; in Bauckham 1999, 127). That will be true in our lives if we understand that, biblically speaking, faith entails a relationship where what we want and will with all our hearts is what God wants. Matthew 6.10, "Your will be done," enacted in the terms of Matthew 7.7–11, ask, seek, and knock, is the key to all faith, and therefore to all supplication. Prayer, even prayer for the sick, is not "a powerful means which qualified people can use to achieve things," but is rather evidence of a relationship in which our petitions are part of lives lived in complete "reliance on God's power" (Bauckham 1999, 127).

So, if you are sick, call for the elders, and the community they lead, to pray over and with you. Know that God can, and sometimes does, heal. But trust him even when he doesn't, confident that he will always give the lasting healing and restoration you need.

Works Cited

Bauckham, Richard. 1999. *James*. New Testament Readings. ed. John Court. Routledge.

McCartney, Dan G. 2009. *James*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Baker Academic.

Moltmann, J. 1997. *The Source of Life*. Trans. M. Kohl. SCM Press. In Bauckham, 1999.

An Additional Thought on James

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas 1.17).

"While we need to be careful not to read the modern Western family into the ancient family, … there is a sense of belonging expressed in this designation of God [Jas 1.17]. God is not an 'impersonal force' behind the universe; rather, he is the Father, whose family includes the followers of Jesus, even if the father in a Mediterranean culture was known more for being the source of identity, authority, and provision than for intimacy (with either his wife or his children). James underlines the authority of this Father by using the term 'God' or 'Lord' with the term 'Father.' It is clear that this Father is very much head of the family and Lord of the universe."

~ Peter H. Davids. 2014. *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*. Biblical Theology of the New Testament. ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger, ed. Zondervan, 72

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV
(All emphasis in Bible quotations added by the author)

Permission is granted to reprint original materials with the credit line,
"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' November 11, 2025"

Feedback is welcome. Direct comments to david@davidanguish.com

To receive each new issue of this newsletter in your inbox, click here.

Want to help distribute this newsletter? Click to leave a donation.

Copyright 2025 by David Anguish