

# ***James 5:13-20***

***Prayer, Praise and***

***Spiritual Healing***

By Timothy Sparks

[TimothySparks.com](http://TimothySparks.com)

# ***Introduction***

- Although perplexing to some, Jas. 5:13-20 is a practical passage in which James tells Christians how to respond appropriately in certain scenarios
- James addresses what the saint should do in the following five situations:
  - (1) When the Saint Suffers
  - (2) When the Saint Smiles
  - (3) When the Saint Struggles
  - (4) When the Saint Sins
  - (5) When the Saint Strays

# *When the Saint Suffers*

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let that person pray” (Jas. 5:13a)

- Instead of “suffering,” Perschbacher defines *κακαποθέω* as “to be vexed, troubled, dejected”
  - “Troubled” or “vexed” may lead readers to think of physical illness
- The parallel NT references (2 Tim. 2:3, 9; 4:5) suggest nothing of illness
- The prophets are an example of patience, not during sickness, but in suffering (Jas. 5:10)

# *When the Saint Suffers*

- James addresses the evil treatment his readers are experiencing, which is probably a direct consequence of their faith
- The better translation is “suffering”
- It is easy to get depressed when a person suffers for doing what is right
  - James prescribes prayer as the “pain reliever” and “antidepressant” for the Christian

# ***When the Saint Smiles***

“Is anyone cheerful? Let that person sing praise”  
(Jas. 5:13b)

- J. W. Roberts states, “**Cheerful** occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only of Paul’s efforts to cheer up his companions in the storm on the voyage to Rome” (Acts 27:22, 25)
- Guy N. Woods affirms, “The word used by James describes an attitude exactly opposite to that indicated in the word ‘suffering,’ in the earlier portion of the verse”
- King says, “We have the two extremes of emotion here—down in the depths, up on the heights”

# *When the Saint Smiles*

- James prohibited profanity (5:12) and seems to be saying, as Charles Erdman points out, “not profanity but prayer and praise are the proper expressions of emotion”
- “Sing praise” is a translation of the word ψαλλέτω, the present active imperative form of ψάλλω
  - Perschbacher defines ψάλλω as “to play on a stringed instrument; to sing to music; in N.T. to sing praises”
  - ψάλλω occurs in Rom. 15:9, 1 Cor. 14:15 and Eph. 5:19

# ***When the Saint Smiles***

- Arndt and Gingrich say, “Although the NT does not voice opposition to instrumental music, in view of Christian resistance to mystery cults, as well as Pharisaic aversion to musical instruments in worship, it is likely that some such sense as make melody is best here. Those who favor ‘play’ may be relying too much on the earliest mng. of ψάλλω”
- There were specific commands in the OT to sing with instrumental accompaniment (2 Chron. 29:25; Ps. 150:3-5), but nowhere in the NT is there a command to use instruments in praising God

# *When the Saint Smiles*

- J. W. Roberts states, “Nothing in the context indicates a meaning other than that of vocal music. A number of considerations have led practically all commentators, lexicographers, and translators to say that in the New Testament the word simply means to *sing praise*. . . . Whatever the word may have meant at other times, in the New Testament, the word simply means ‘to sing’”

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

“Is anyone among you weak? Let him invite the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the one who is weary, and the Lord will raise him up and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him” (Jas. 5:14-15)

- In the New Testament, unless James is the exception, there is no mention of the elders conducting a miraculous healing ministry for the physically sick

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- Paul mentions “gifts of healing” (1 Cor. 12:9, 28, 30), but he does not indicate to whom it was given
- Paul had miraculous powers; but instead of the Lord instructing him to heal himself of his “thorn in the flesh,” the Lord tells him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power reaches completion in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:7-9)
- Instead of telling Timothy to call for the elders and have them anoint him with oil to heal his physical illness, Paul told him to “use a little wine” (1 Tim. 5:23)

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- In the NT there is far greater emphasis on spiritual healing than on curing the physically sick
- Both Paul and James teach that Christians are to consider physical distresses as opportunities to rejoice and to grow spiritually (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:16-18; Phil. 4:4; Jas. 1:2-4)
- Daniel Hayden states, “The sudden emergence of instruction dealing with a ministry of divine healing for the sick at the end of a book stressing solely matters of spiritual concern seems somewhat incongruous”

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- “Sick” occurs twice in some translations of Jas. 5:14-15, but there are two different words in Greek
  - In verse 14 the word is ἀσθενέω
  - John Thomas says, “An overwhelming majority of scholars understand James to be addressing those who are physically sick when he uses the term ἀσθενέω”
  - However according to Arndt and Gingrich, ἀσθενέω can have a literal or figurative meaning: “weak, powerless 1. lit. of bodily weakness 2. fig. of religious and moral weakness”

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- Perschbacher suggests that the primary meaning is “to be weak, infirm, deficient in strength”
- Context determines whether ἀσθενέω is referring to physical weakness or spiritual weakness
- Hayden affirms, . . . “ἀσθενέω is a word which is used in the Epistles primarily to describe a spiritually 'weak' person, and therefore James 5:14 should be properly translated, 'Is any weak among you?' The context would certainly be agreeable to this rendering”
- Jesus says that those who are physically sick need a doctor (Mk. 2:17)

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- James says that those who are spiritually sick should call for the elders (the spiritual leaders)
- James gives instructions that the elders should “pray over” the person who is weak, “having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord”
  - There is no doubt that the literal anointing with oil was an actual practice long before James writes
  - Samuel’s anointing of David was literal (1 Sam. 16:13); but “anointing with oil” was also used figuratively (Ps. 23:5)

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- Jesus quotes from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor” (Is. 61:1; Lk. 4:18)
  - He then applies Isaiah’s message of anointing to himself (Lk. 4:21)
- The Spirit’s descending on Jesus as a dove at his immersion seems to provide a picture of Jesus being anointed by the Spirit (Mt. 3:16)
- The writer of Hebrews uses “oil” metaphorically when he refers to “the oil of gladness” (Is. 61:3): “Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness . . .” (Heb. 1:9)

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- Three views of the purpose of anointing with oil:
  - (1) medicinal
  - (2) sacramental
  - (3) symbolic
- Concerning the medicinal use of oil, Robert Karris states as “an assured fact” that the ancients believed “olive oil had healing qualities”
  - Isaiah 1:6 is a reference to wounds and bruises that have not been soothed with oil
    - Isaiah's use of “oil” is part of the symbolic imagery of spiritual sickness (1:5)

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- Josephus clearly conveys that oil was used during Herod's terrible illness
  - One of the many remedies Herod allowed his doctors to try was seating him in a tub of warm oil
  - Philo expresses the value of olive oil: "Again: why need we seek for more in the way of ointment than the juice pressed out of the fruit of the olive? For that softens the limbs, and relieves the labour [sic] of the body, and produces a good condition of the flesh; and if anything has got relaxed or flabby, it binds it again, and makes it firm and solid, and it fills us with vigour [sic] and strength of muscle, no less than any other unguent"

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- One reference in the NT that associates oil with healing is the occasion when the apostles anointed the sick with oil (Mk. 6:13)
  - John Thomas says, “While most commentators acknowledge that oil had medicinal associations in antiquity, there appears to be unanimity of opinion that the anointing with oil described in Mk 6.13 served as a symbol of God’s healing power”
- Another reference to oil is when the Samaritan poured oil and wine on the wounds of the man who had been beaten by robbers (Lk. 10:30-34)

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- However, Gary Shogren insists that “Oil was by no means regarded as a panacea in the first century; we need not suppose that the medical profession of those days was that primitive”
- While it is clear that oil was used in ancient times for medicinal purposes, James says that “the prayer of faith will save the one who is weary” (5:15), not the oil
  - James’ use of “oil” does not refer to medicine for the body

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- In examining the sacramental view of anointing with oil, Kurt Richardson states that the Roman Catholic doctrine of “extreme unction,” which is “the practice of anointing the sick as an instrument of grace,” uses Jas. 5:14 as its foundation
  - John Calvin says, “The Papists boast mightily of this passage, when they seek to pass off their extreme unction. . . . I will only say this, that this passage is wickedly and ignorantly perverted, when extreme unction is established by it, and is called a sacrament, to be perpetually observed in the Church”

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- Wesley similarly states, “That novel invention among the Romanists, extreme unction, practised [sic] not for cure, but where life is despaired of, bears no manner of resemblance to this”
- While this passage does not teach the Catholic doctrine of extreme unction, Catholics do have some good points that should be considered
  - H. Willmering expresses that spiritual healing is implied by the fact that James does not mention calling for a physician; that the anointing is to be done “in the name of the Lord;” and that it is closely related to “the prayer of faith”

# *When the Saint Struggles*

- Daniel Harrington says, “What is expected from the prayer and anointing is that the sick person 'will be saved' (sōzō) and 'the Lord will raise him up' (egeirō). These . . . are prominent in the 'spiritual' vocabulary of the New Testament”
- The third view is that the anointing is symbolic
  - The two words that mean “to anoint” are ἀλείφω (*aleiphō*) and χρίω (*chriō*)
    - Ralph Martin says that χρίω would have been a better choice to show that the anointing was symbolic; but the choice of ἀλείφω does not rule out the possibility

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- The phrase “having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord” immediately after “let them pray over him,” seems to indicate that James links prayer with “oil” by means of a figure of speech called a metalepsis
  - Loren Gieger defines “metalepsis” as a double metonymy: “The words used in this figure of speech are a substitution of a related idea, as in metonymy; but another idea (which is not expressed) has to be supplied by the reader in order to grasp the full meaning of the expression”
  - Gieger cites the cross as an example of metalepsis

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- The cross first represents the act of crucifixion, or Jesus who was crucified on the cross
- Then it represents the results of his atonement by means of crucifixion
- Gieger also cites “the twelve tribes,” “the wheel of nature” and “anointing with oil” as possible examples of metalepsis in the Book of James
- He says, “The ‘anointing with oil’ may be a figurative adjunct to the prayer of the elders”
  - Supplementary rather than essential
  - The elders are to “pray over” the person, which conveys the idea that their prayer is a symbolic anointing

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- Upon completion of the prayer, the elders will have anointed the spiritually weak person with prayer, which is the spiritual oil
  - For James, the oil is prayer
- In verse 15 the word some translators render as “sick” (better translated “weary”) is κάμνω: “and the prayer of faith will save the one who is weary”
  - κάμνω occurs in the following passage:

“For consider him who has endured such hostility by sinners against himself, so that you may not grow weary (κάμνω) and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your struggle against sin” (Heb. 12:3-4)

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- Arndt and Gingrich confirm that the primary meaning of κάμνω is “be weary, fatigued”
  - The writer of Hebrews tells Christians not to grow weary in their spiritual struggle against sin
  - Clearly, κάμνω refers to spiritual weariness
  - In the same way, James uses κάμνω to refer to the one who is spiritually weary
- The word “save” (σώζω; sōzō) refers to spiritual salvation
  - However, many, if not most Protestant commentators and even some Catholic commentators believe that it means “heal”

# ***When the Saint Struggles***

- According to Perschbacher, the primary meaning of σωζω (sōzō) is “to save, rescue”
- While it can refer to physical healing, all the other occurrences of σωζω in James refer to spiritual salvation:
  - 1:21
  - 2:14
  - 4:12
  - 5:20

# ***When the Saint Sins***

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has powerful results. Elijah was a person with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit” (Jas. 5:16-18)

- The words “confess” and “pray” are both second person plural imperatives (“all of you confess/pray”)
  - James envisions congregational prayer in which the saints participate in acknowledging their sins and in praying for one another (cf. Col. 3:16)

# ***When the Saint Sins***

- The writer of Hebrews uses the word “healed” (Heb. 12:13) in the context of spiritual weariness (Heb. 12:3-4) and spiritual weakness (Heb. 12:12)
  - In the same way, James uses the word “healed” to refer to spiritual healing
- James uses Elijah as an illustration of a “weak” and “weary” saint whose prayer was powerful
  - James states, “Elijah was a person with a nature like ours”
    - Donald Burdick says this means that Elijah was “a human being”

# ***When the Saint Sins***

- R. V. G. Tasker affirms, “So wonderful did the achievements of Elijah seem to succeeding generations that he came to be regarded as semi-divine. Had he really been a superman his example would have been profitless to ordinary Christians. James accordingly is at pains to reassure his readers that the saints of the old covenant were no demi-gods”
- Hayden says, “. . . he is obviously referring to that one unforgettable event when the prophet became weary in his continued contest with the nation’s sin. His discouragement turned to depression, and he fled in fear and cried out to God to take his life” (1 Kings 19:1-5)

# ***When the Saint Sins***

- If James wants his readers to understand this passage as an explanation of the power of prayer for healing physical sickness, then James is using the wrong person as an illustration
  - Elisha is a far better illustration for physical healing (2 Kings 2-13)
  - Hayden says: “But why did James not refer to Elijah’s dramatic prayer for the healing of the widow’s son (1 Kings 17:17-24)? Surely James would have chosen that prayer if he were seeking to illustrate effective praying for physical healing. . . . he sought to picture fervent prayer in the midst of conflict with sin rather than a prayer ministry for the sick”

# *When the Saint Strays*

“My brothers, if anyone among you strays from the truth and one brings that person back, let him know that the one who brings back a sinner out of his way of error will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (Jas. 5:19-20)

- The words “my brothers” and “among you” indicate that the discussion is limited to Christians
  - Roberts says, “One could not wander from the truth unless he had been in it”
  - “Will save” (σώζω) occurs in v. 20 (cf. v. 15)

# ***When the Saint Strays***

- Martin Dibelius says, “. . . what is probably in mind is the danger of eternal damnation at the Judgment, and in that case only a reference to the apostate would be suitable. For this fate of ‘death’ would not be a threat at all for the converter, since he has remained a Christian and true to his faith”
- The wayward brother is referred to as a sinner who must be brought back to the truth in order to be spared spiritual death and to be forgiven of sins

# *Conclusion*

- James tells saints to pray in times of suffering
- The way to express happiness is to sing praise
- Christians who are spiritually sick or weak should call for the elders to pray for them
- The present study has made it clear that Jas. 5:14-15 does not teach the Roman Catholic doctrine of extreme unction
  - While it is clear that in antiquity and in the New Testament the physically sick were sometimes anointed with oil, James recommends spiritual pastoral prayer for the spiritually sick

# *Conclusion*

- Gieger appropriately states, “This figurative interpretation gives abiding significance to the author’s instructions, and it shows the value of the recognition of metalepsis for New Testament exegesis”
- Saints who have sinned should engage in congregational prayer as a community of believers who are concerned for one another’s spiritual welfare
  - Elijah serves as an illustration of a person who had spiritual weaknesses, but his prayers were powerful

# ***Conclusion***

- Christians should make it a priority to bring erring brothers and sisters back to the truth
  - When a wayward brother is brought “out of his way of error,” his soul is saved from eternal death and is granted the forgiveness of sins
  - Luke Timothy Johnson summarizes the closing words of the Book of James by saying, “And at the end, James tells his readers to do for each other what he has tried to do for them”

# ***Memory Verse Review*** ***(2 Timothy—James)***

- 2 Tim. 2:15—“Do your best...”
- Titus 2:11-12—“For the grace...”
- Philemon 20—“Yes, brother...”
- Heb. 3:12—“Beware, brothers...”
- Jas. 1:22—“But...”