

# When Righteous Men Pray

## March 14, 2007

Part of what I hope we've learned in these 20 weeks is that studying the Bible can be fun and educational. It's also usually fairly demanding, but its demands are energizing, liberating, and life-changing in healthy ways. At the outset I want you to know I'm appreciative of your efforts to get up and to get here, and I hope what you take from here has been worth the investment of time you've given.

### James 5:13-20

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.

<sup>16</sup>Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

<sup>17</sup>Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. <sup>18</sup>Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. <sup>19</sup>My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, <sup>20</sup>remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

The Bible is primarily a book that deals with our spiritual well-being, both now and for eternity; it is not a book that's overly interested in healing physical disease or discomfort, except for a few limited occasions when God was affirming the authority and attesting to the identity of some, not all, of the prophets in the Old Testament, and of his Son in the New Testament. Even then the primary reason for miracles had less to do with the physical reality than it did the spiritual one...

### John 19:21

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

I believe every story that's told in the Bible about the miraculous power of God, but I don't infer from that reality any suggestion that we're supposed to invest our time and resources trying to duplicate the miraculous as a sign of our faith nor as a reward for our faith.

## I. Clearing up some misconceptions...

A. Having faith protects us from illness, sickness, disease & etc.

- Nothing could be further from the truth.
- There is NO evidence of this ever having been the case among any people of any faith group.
- There are a number of reasons for sickness, illness, disease, pain and suffering, and most have far less to do with faith than with common sense.

1. The violation of natural law.

- a. If I try to fly off the top of this building the result is predictable...and painful.

- i. I won't break the law of gravity when I do that—I'll break my neck, but I won't break the law of gravity.
  - ii. On the contrary, I'll prove the law of gravity.
- b. If I fill my lungs with smoke, I'll suffer for it.
- c. If I eat too much stuff that tastes good and too little of the stuff that tastes bad, I'll suffer for it.

2. Congenital birth defects.

- a. Some people believe birth defects are the result of some manner of familial sin and resulting "curse" or punishment for sin.
- b. I disagree comprehensively.
  - i. The occasion in John 9 where a man was born blind should put it to rest.
  - ii. Jesus said that his blindness wasn't the result of anyone's sin.
    - 1. Neither the man himself (a curious Jewish thought was that people could sin prior to birth) nor his parents had sinned.
    - 2. But that the response of God's people should be to see what they could do to help in order to honor God.

3. God-ordained personal development.

- a. Job...
  - i. It was Satan's attack, but it was God's purpose.
  - ii. Satan could do no more than God allowed—and it seems he allowed a lot to me.
  - iii. I readily admit that I don't understand this AT ALL...
- b. Paul...
  - i. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul's *thorn in the flesh* was the direct result of God's desire for Paul to remain humble in spite of the tremendous spiritual revelations he'd been privileged to experience (v. 7a)
  - ii. And although it came in the form of painful physical illness (v.7 b), delivered by a *messenger of satan* (v. 7c), it was in fact a *gift of grace*, that resulted in Paul's own development of unshakable character and trust in God (v.9) regardless of what circumstances he might have to endure—including the serious illness he presently endured.

4. Sin-related illness.

- I want to be very careful, and caution that we don't take any liberties with this...
  - But there is an occasion in Scripture where sickness is the direct result of behavior that is, for reasons I don't understand fully, particularly displeasing to God...
- a. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-30 some people were abusing the Lord's Supper observance because of which, "...many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."
- i. But some of these same people were practicing all manner of sexual perversion, but, as far as the Scripture states, they weren't punished this way.

- ii. And they were introducing all sorts of pagan practices into the church as well, but weren't punished in this manner either.
  - b. In Acts 5:1-11 Ananias and Sapphira lied about how much they were giving to the church, and they both died.
    - i. They could have given nothing, and they wouldn't have died, said Paul.
    - ii. But the fact that they lied about it caused their deaths.
  - c. In Acts 12:19-23 Herod gave a speech, apparently a pretty good one, because the crowd said, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man," and because Herod didn't correct them, he was immediately struck dead by an angel of the Lord.
    - i. But when he ordered the soldiers to crucify Jesus nothing happened to him.
    - ii. When he killed John the Baptist...nothing happened to him.
    - iii. I don't get it...
- B. All sickness, illness, disease, discomfort & etc. is the result of personal sin and/or a lack of faith and, therefore, may be avoided and/or remedied through personal righteousness and/or the application of faith.

- The only thing wrong with that is that it's wrong.
- It's so wrong I can't describe it.
- It's wrong at every point.

1. If sickness, disease, illness, & etc. is the result of sin, then it only makes sense to assume that if the sin is forgiven and the sinner cleansed of his or her sin, that the sickness, disease, illness & etc. would be taken away—otherwise the punishment doesn't fit the crime, so to speak.

a. If we confess our sin, does God forgive our sin and cleanse us from any unrighteousness connected to our sin?

b. Of course he does...

**1 John 1:9**

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

c. This argument is over—it's not logical, and it's not biblical.

2. If sickness, disease, illness, & etc. is the result of sin, then any person that is living a life of faithfulness to God will be able to avoid all sickness, illness, pain & etc.

**1 Timothy 5:23**

Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.

**2 Timothy 4:19-20**

Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus. <sup>20</sup>Erastus stayed in Corinth, and I left Trophimus sick in Miletus.

### **Philippians 2:25-27**

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. <sup>26</sup>For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. <sup>27</sup>Indeed he was ill, and almost died.

- The simple fact is, there is no single passage in the Bible that gives you or me any reason to believe we have the right to assume that because of our faith in God it is our right to expect being exempt from illness...
- Faith and health...faithlessness and sickness have very little to do with each other, and probably they don't have anything to do with each other.

### **DISCUSSION**

1. Are Christians so concerned with life being comfortable and pleasant that we've lost the ability to appreciate the biblically stated "fact" that even Jesus had to *learn obedience through the things that we suffer* (i.e. Hebrews 5:8)?
2. Is our greatest problem as modern Christians, as was opined by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, that *we have lost the ability to appreciate the value of suffering*?
3. Is it the case that personal comfort and success has become more important to Christ-followers than radical obedience to God and his word?

### **II. Why then should we pray when we get sick and why should we ask to be prayed over by others and anointed with oil?**

- A. It's always good to pray, regardless of what the situation is.
  - a. Prayer works...
  - b. Sometimes that means that in direct response to our prayers God intervenes and does something that he would not have otherwise have done...
  - c. But more often than not it means that although God will not change my circumstance, he will change me to enable me to endure my circumstance in such a way that God will be honored and other people will be encouraged.

#### **1 Corinthians 10:13**

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

- B. The anointing oil has two interpretations: that it is a vehicle through which God will heal sickness, or that is that it's value is simply medicinal.
  - a. James may well have had in mind the gift of apostolic healing that Jesus gave his 12 original disciples during the days when the foundation for Christ's church was being laid by those 12 hand-chosen men.
    - i. It was given only to those 12 men...

- ii. Within a span of 10 years or so, the gift disappeared even for them, as I showed you earlier.
  - b. In the ancient world Doctors used olive oil as a salve for wounds or as a mollifying dressing for pain and ailments routinely.
    - iii. There is a sense in which James words should simply be understood as advice to seek medical treatment.
    - iv. In James' day medical knowledge was almost non-existent compared to what doctors know today, and home remedies were common and depended upon by most people for most ailments.
- C. Then the “prayer of faith” will provide three things (v. 15).
- a. The sick person will get better.
  - b. The sick person will be raised up.
  - c. The sick person's sin will be forgiven.
- You cannot apply James words to anyone and everyone with any and all manner of sickness.
  - His words apply only to the specific realm of sickness that is the result of personal sin.
  - To me this may be the key to understanding the entire issue.
    - If a person's sickness is the result of sin, which may not even apply to our time, because we haven't the apostolic gift of the disciples that would allow us such intimate knowledge...
    - Then that person should:
      - Invite the church's leaders to visit him...
      - Ask to be anointed with oil, which may have the two meanings we mentioned earlier.
      - Confess the specific sin.
      - And pray to be forgiven.
    - Then the sin WILL be forgiven and the person WILL be healed.
      - No “ifs, ands or buts...”
      - If you do this and the person is still sick, then forget about this as a solution to the problem...
- D. James is advising that:
- a. When we're sick we should certainly pray, which empowers us.
  - b. And we should find the best doctor around and do what he or she tells us to do if we want to get better.

### III. The powerful and effective “prayer offered in faith”.

- A. A “prayer offered in faith” is the prayer of a righteous person, such as Elijah.
- The story is told in 1 Kings 17 and 18.
  - He prayed that it wouldn't rain for three years and it didn't, then he prayed that it would rain and it did.
  - The difference between him and us, is that he knew this was exactly what God wanted to happen.

- You and I don't have that kind of knowledge anymore than we have the apostolic gift of healing...
  - I know I don't, and I don't believe people that tell me they do...
  - I hope not to offend anyone with my words, but it's the case...I've seen and heard way too much nonsense to conclude otherwise.

### **I Kings 17:1-2; 8; 24**

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."

<sup>2</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah:

<sup>8</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to him:

<sup>24</sup>Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."

### **I Kings 18:1**

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land."

- Everything about this prayer had to do with Elijah's focus on "the word of the Lord."
- Nothing he asked for had his personal interests in mind.
- And all of it was the result of the unique relationship he had with God...
  - No one else in Israel had that relationship...
  - God spoke only to Elijah in this manner.

B. A "prayer offered in faith" is a prayer whose goal and focus is God's will alone.

### **1 John 5:14-15**

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. <sup>15</sup>And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

- A prayer of faith is never a prayer simply about what you want...although it's right and good to pray about what you want (Philippians 4:6)
- A prayer of faith is always prayer about what God wants for us...and usually that's different from what we want for ourselves.
- That's why it takes a righteous man to pray this kind of prayer.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Psalms 37:4**

Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

### **Romans 12:1-2**

I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

2. What do they have in common?

#### **IV. Conclusion**

I honestly have to wonder if it's even possible for you and me to pray this kind of prayer. I don't think it is. Unless I know, beyond the possibility of any doubt, that God wants me to pray for someone or something in a very specific way, I don't see how I can pray this.

For me it has to be a prayer of something I believe God might want...because I simply don't know. But that doesn't stop me from asking for a lot from God. Sometimes I get it, and sometimes I don't get it. Either way, I don't use James' words, or any words from the Bible, as a reason to expect God to do everything I want him to do.

I pray, and I pray a good bit. From time to time I see things change. But mostly it's me that changes. And for me, that's both powerful and effective praying.