

James' Instructions to Ill Christians

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¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful, let him sing praise.

¹⁴Is anyone among you infirm? 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. ¹⁵And the prayer of faith shall save the one who is labouring, and the Lord shall raise him. And if he has committed sins, he shall be forgiven.

¹⁶Confess then your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

A righteous person's supplication is very powerful in its effect. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being who felt like us, and he prayed intently that it should not rain, and for three years and six months, it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain, and the earth yielded its fruit. (Jas. 5:13–18)

Illness is a problem that all Christians have to face, especially in their middle or later years. James is the one NT writer to give instructions to ill Christians. These are therefore very important.

They are, however, problematic. On first reading, they give the impression that Christians can always be healed. This does not accord with the teaching of Jesus. He said that his followers would perform acts of healing as signs (Mark 16:15–18), but he did not promise that followers would always be healed. Thus:

- He taught his disciples that, at the Last Judgment, he would separate people according to how they treated 'the least of these my brothers and sisters' (Matt. 25:31–46). The latter included some who were ill (36), and the ministry he commended was *visiting* them (*episkeptomai*), not healing them.
- After the Last Supper, he told his disciples, 'In the world you will have tribulation (*thlipsis*)' (John 16:33). *Thlipsis* is a broad term, and almost certainly includes illness.¹ There are several examples in the NT of Christians being ill: Paul (Gal. 4:13–14), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25–27), Timothy (1 Tim. 5:23), and Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20).
- In Revelation, John saw, in the New Jerusalem, the tree of life, the leaves of which were 'for the healing of the nations' (Rev. 22:2). This revelation *does* promise healing for God's people, but in the world to come.

James' instructions

How then are we to understand James' instructions? A key step is to recognize that in verses 14–15, he is not addressing someone who is ill, but *very* ill. The person is described as 'weak' (*astheneō*) and 'labouring' (*kamnō*),² and is so ill that he or she is unable to leave the house (James tells the person to call for the elders to come to the house).

¹ Cf. *TDNT*, Vol. III, 139–148.

² There are several words for illness in the NT (*NBD*, 313¹). *Astheneō* and its cognates describe *debilitating* illness. *Kamnō* is only used of illness here.

Further, in verse 16a, James is not addressing *all* ill Christians, but only those whose illness is a direct result of their sin. Illness can sometimes be a direct result of sin (1 Cor. 11:27–30), but often it is not. This is the message of the book of Job. It is also what Jesus taught. When the disciples asked him about a man who had been born blind, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?’, he replied, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned’ (John 9:1–3).³ James recognized this in respect of the very ill person in verses 14–15 (‘*if* he has committed sins’).

What then about illness that is neither extreme (14–15) nor the direct result of sin (16a)? This comes under verse 13a, ‘Is anyone among you suffering (*kakopatheō*)?’ *Kakopatheō* is another broad term, and again almost certainly includes illness.⁴ Thus, James is addressing *three* classes of ill person, and giving different instructions to each.

Instruction to Christians with ordinary illness (13a)

James’ general instruction is that those who are suffering should pray. The question is, when suffering takes the form of illness, what should we pray? If Jesus has not promised healing, what should we ask?

James has already indicated how we should pray in circumstances like this in 4:13–15. This is by praying for what we would like, ‘if the Lord wills’. This is how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane:⁵

‘Father, if you are fully willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.’ (Luke 22:42)

We can thus pray for healing, ‘if the Lord wills’.

Prayer for healing does not preclude seeking medical help. Paul commends Luke as a physician (Col. 4:14), and gives Timothy medical advice for his stomach problems (1 Tim. 5:23).

Whether we are healed naturally or supernaturally, we are to be thankful. James instructs the cheerful to ‘sing praise’ (13b).

If we are not healed, we have to remember all that Jesus said to his disciples after the Last Supper (John 14–16). As we have seen, he told them that in the world they would have tribulation (16:33). But he also told them that he would be *with* them in their tribulation (14:18), and that he would one day take them *out* of tribulation (14:1–3).

We have to remember too that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, or his ways our ways (Is. 55:8–9). His purposes are sometimes advanced, not by healing us, but by allowing our illness to continue, and sustaining us in it.

Paul spoke of having a ‘thorn in the flesh’ which he asked the Lord to take away. The Lord did not take it away, but told Paul that it would make him a more humble and dependent Christian (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

³ His disability was therefore due to the sin of humankind as a whole, going back to Adam and Eve, and resulting in the Curse (see Gen. 3:17–19, Luke 13:1–5, Rev. 22:2–3).

⁴ Cf. *TDNT*, Vol. V, 936–938.

⁵ I have attempted to distinguish between *boulomai* and *thelō* here.

The apostle reminded the Galatians that it was because of an illness that he preached the gospel to them (Gal. 4:13–14). We do not know the details of this, but whatever they were, God had evidently used his illness for good. If we are not healed, we have to trust that the Lord is using our illness for good, whether we can see this or not.

Instructions to Christians who are very ill (14–15)

James instructs those who are very ill to ask the elders of the church to pray over them. He says that the prayer of faith will ‘save’ such a person, and that the Lord will ‘raise’ him or her.

It is important to notice that James’ language here carries a double meaning. He does not say that the Lord will ‘heal’ the ill person (*iaomai*, as in 16a), but that he will ‘save’ (*sōzō*) and ‘raise’ (*egeirō*) the person. Both words can be taken in a physical sense or a spiritual one.⁶ James thus anticipates two possible outcomes: either that the person is healed physically and raised from his or her bed, or that he or she is saved spiritually and raised up into heaven (Luke 23:43, John 14:1–3, Rev. 7:9–17). James wants the elders’ prayer to cover both possibilities, and the ill person to have peace either way.

Instructions to Christians whose illness is due to their sin (16a)

James instructs those whose illness is a direct result of their sin to confess their sins to one another, and pray for one another. He anticipates that, in such cases, if a person repents and asks for forgiveness, with forgiveness (1 John 1:9) will come healing (cf. Matt. 9:1–8). This is, as we have seen, a special circumstance. Most illness comes under verse 13a.

James concludes by affirming the effectiveness of the prayer of a righteous person (16b–18). He cites the example of Elijah, who prayed for drought (1 Kings 17:1), and then for rain (1 Kings 18:41–45), according to what God had intimated (in Deut. 28:15, 23–24 and 1 Kings 18:1 respectively).

Conclusion

James’ instructions to ill Christians can be interpreted in a way that is consistent with the teaching of Jesus.⁷

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⁶ *Sōzō* is sometimes used of physical healing (e.g., Matt. 9:20–22).

⁷ Paul’s reference to (lit.) ‘gifts of healings’ (1 Cor. 12:7–11) can be understood similarly.