

# "DIVINE HEALING" ACCORDING TO JAMES 5

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"C.T. Studd, alone in the heart of Africa except for one young co-worker only twenty years of age, seemed at the point of death. In the darkest hour he recalled this promise. He writes: 'There was but one 'elder' and he was in his twentieth year; no matter, 'One day is as a thousand years.' But where was the oil? Neither salad, olive or even linseed oil did we possess! What's the matter with lamp oil? What, kerosene? Why not? It is oil, and that is all the Book says, and we cannot afford to be narrow-minded. The 'elder' brought in the lamp oil, dipped his finger, anointed my forehead, and then knelt and prayed. How God did it I don't know, nor do I care; but this I knew next morning, that whereas I was sick, nigh unto death, now I was healed. We can trust Him too little, but we cannot trust God too much."  
--- Norman P. Grubb<sup>1</sup>

For the true believer there is no question either that our Lord healed the sick in the days when He walked upon this earth, or that He will heal in the millennial age as promised in the Word (Isa. 35:5,6; Mal. 4:2, etc.). The question that presents itself to our thinking in these days is whether He heals the sick today, and if so, just what conditions and limitations, if any, are involved.

That our Lord possesses the power to miraculously heal the sick no true believer can seriously doubt. That He wills to do so in our present age is not so universally accepted. Nor is there agreement even among those who believe that God still works such miracles as bodily healing. Tracts, booklets, and books on the subject are legion, revealing many widely divergent views.

That there is so much interest in the subject of "divine healing" is certainly understandable. Is there anything more universal to mankind than sickness and suffering? And if, after all, there is an answer to physical pain and misery, why should we not benefit from it?

The problem that Christendom faces today, however, is that much which is presented to a gullible public in the name of "divine healing" is Scripturally unsound and experientially worse than worthless. Hopes for healing are replaced with feelings of utter despair, and the only ones who seem to gain from these "healing campaigns" are the self-appointed prophets (perhaps better termed "profiteers").

As a dear brother has said, "People are flocking by the thousands and tens of thousands in different cities to adventurers and adventuresses who oftentimes not only rob them of their gold but of that which is far more precious than gold."<sup>2</sup> And, let me add, who is not cognizant of the multitudes who are held spellbound every week by the drama of "healing miracles" brought right into their homes via TV?

It is not within our present purpose, however, to deal with all the ramifications of the present healing movements. A number of publications are available which effectively answer the claims of the cultists (e.g. "The Modern Tongues and Healing Movement" by Rev. Carroll Stegall, Jr.).

The purpose of this present study, then, is not to duplicate these general studies, but to consider very specifically the subject of healing in light of James 5:13-16. "Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? 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 shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

### 1. VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

In order that we might clear the way for a proper understanding of James 5:13-16 we must first consider the various interpretations given to the passage. In doing so we must attempt to be as honestly objective in our evaluation of them as possible. Our judgment must always be based upon the eternal, unchanging Word of God, never upon personal bias or passing feelings. Isaiah 8:20 must be our watchword: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." It is our prayer that He Who inspired James to write the words before us will remove from our thinking both the pitfalls of prejudice and the stumps of unbelief, and show us the precise ground for healing, if any, for our day.

There appear to be at least five primary interpretations of James 5:13-16. These we will term: (1) The Roman Catholic view (2) the Hyper-dispensational view (3) the Pentecostal view (4) the popular or Protestant view (5) the Biblical or symbolic view.

#### 1. THE ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW

In its interpretation of the passage before us we certainly have what Dr. Gaebelein has called "A revelation of Roman misuse of Scripture."<sup>3</sup> Actually we find within these three short verses the basis for two of their most prominent teachings.

Incidental to our study of healing but indicative of their distortion of the Word is the fact that their "Sacrament" of auricular confession to a "priest" is based upon verse 16, "confess your faults one to another." As Luther exclaimed, "A strange confessor! His name is One Another."<sup>4</sup>

It is the Catholic interpretation of verse 14 that we are most concerned with here. Upon this verse Rome has built its doctrine of "extreme unction." This doctrine according to James Cardinal Gibbons, in his book, The Faith of Our Fathers, "is a Sacrament in which the sick, by anointing with holy oil and the prayers of the Priest, receive spiritual succor and even corporal strength when such is conducive to their salvation. This unction is called Extreme, because it is usually the last of the holy unctions administered by the Church."<sup>5</sup>

Arthur Pink speaks for many of us when he says, "We have no hesitation in denouncing their (i.e., Romanist) perversion as a mere hypocritical pagantry. The 'unction' they use," he tells us,

"must be olive oil mixed with balsam, consecrated by a bishop, who must nine times bow the knee, saying thrice 'Ave, sanctumoleum' (Hail, holy oil), and thrice 'Ave Sanctum chrisma' (Hail, holy chrisim), and thrice more, 'Ave, sanctum Balsamum' (Hail, holy balsam). The members anointed are the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and for the extremities, the reins and feet: in women, the navel. The design thereof is, the expulsion of the relics of sin and to equip the soul for its conflicts with the powers of evil in the moment of death." And he concludes, "one has but to mention these things to reveal their absurdity."<sup>6</sup>

Let us note the passage again. The command does not read, "Is any sinful among you? Let him call for the priests..." but "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders..." As Lehman Strauss has well stated in his excellent study of the Book of James, "One need not be a theologian to see the Roman fallacy. The alleged purpose of 'extreme unction' is to prepare a soul for death, while the purpose of anointing in this passage is to restore a sick person to health and preserve life."<sup>7</sup>

## 2. THE HYPER-DISPENSATIONAL VIEW

There are some hyper-dispensationalists, such as the followers of Bullinger, who declare that the passage has no application to Christians today since it was written by James to the "Twelve Tribes scattered abroad." As one brother has effectively answered, "True, the letter is directed to them; but if every letter were intended only for the group to which it was addressed, what would remain of the Bible for us today? The Corinthians are gone, the Ephesians are gone, and the Collossians; Timothy is gone and Titus is gone. There are no books written to 'The Americans.'"<sup>8</sup>

It may be true, as some have declared, that the book of James, "may confidently be set down as 'the first Epistle to Christians.'" Let us note, however, that it is still "the first Epistle to Christians," who held, according to James himself, "the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ" (James 2: 1).

It should also be noted that these Christians of the Dispersion were conscious of the return of their Saviour (cf. James 5:7-8). Indeed, it is in the very context of practical exhortations in view of the "Second Coming" that we find the instructions, "Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray... Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the Church."

Although the question of dispensationalism, hyper-dispensationalism, etc., are too complex for consideration here, these few brief suggestions should show the error of those who, in wrongly dividing the Word of truth, would rob the Church not only of the book of James but much of the New Testament.

## 3. THE PENTECOSTAL VIEW

This view is that generally held by the so-called "faith healers" of our day. The Pentecostal view authoritatively claims healing for any and all, if they have sufficient faith.

This view, with or without its various attachments and embellishments, is based upon two basic teachings: First, that healing is in the atonement, and second, that God is still bestowing the special "gift" of healing upon certain select individuals. These teachings have been adequately refuted in the studies mentioned in our introduction. We shall not deal with them here.

However, it is necessary for our consideration of James 5 to see whether these teachings are involved here. Dr. A.B. Simpson, who bears certain marks of "Pentecostalism" (cf. his attitude toward "tongues," as well as "healing"), has said that we have in James 5:14, "A distinct ordinance of healing in His name as sacred and binding as any other ordinance of the Gospel."<sup>9</sup> He, like many others who hold what we have called the "Pentecostal view," groups this text with all other passages on healing and apparently sees it in both the involvement of Christ's atoning death and special gifts.

Let it be noted that that neither is stated or implied in the passage. In fact, the very thing that seems to make this passage distinctive from those in the Gospel accounts is that no room is left for a special gift upon any individual healer. (See the following section on Exegetical Analysis.) Nor can we see the necessity for any atonement for our illnesses, especially since its relationship to any sin is plainly stated to be only in the realm of possibility; i.e., "and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him."

#### 4. THE POPULAR OR PROTESTANT VIEW

Actually there are several variations of interpretation that could find their place under such a heading.

In liberal Protestant circles miracles of any kind are unpopular, and for the most part a passage such as that before us would be totally ignored except, perhaps, to teach the psychological efficacy of prayer in healing troubled minds. And true it is that much that passes as "healing" today is either real cures of imaginary diseases or imaginary cures of real diseases. But this hardly satisfies the text.

There are, of course, some who spiritualize the entire passage and present it only as a figurative picture of the healing of the soul. Such an interpretation leaves one rather cold, and we are caused to wonder whether words have lost all meaning. Should God have wanted to give us specific instructions for anointing and praying for the ill, how could He have said it more plainly than He has in James 5:13-16?

There is also that common view in some Protestant circles that the oil mentioned is the agent, at least in part, of healing and that the anointing with oil was for therapeutic purposes. It must be admitted that oil was often used as a medicinal agent in the days of our Lord. Dr. Gaebelein, among others, points out that "oil was one of the commonest of ancient remedies." He states that "Galen, the famous Greek physician, mentions it; Pliny and Philo refer to it as a therapeutic agent; and it was used in Herod's last illness. In our Lord's parable, the good Samaritan treated the traveler's wounds with oil and wine. On the basis of such evidence," he says, "the inference is drawn that James is counseling the use of medical means along with prayer." However, Dr. Gaebelein would bring us to the conclusion "...to accept it as the full answer to the problem of the passage entails making mere oil the panacea for every form of illness, an obvious absurdity."<sup>10</sup>

It should also be noted that were the anointing of oil to be of therapeutic value, it would not be necessary to call the elders of the church, nor should its use be limited to only Christians. Further details in refuting this position will be revealed in the following section on our exegetical analysis. Suffice it to say here, in conclusion, that the word "anoint" (aleipho) does not imply a

"rubbing in" or "massaging" as sometimes claimed. The Greek words translated "anoint" that have such a meaning are chrio (lit. "to rub," cf. Luke 4:18), egchrio (lit. "to rub in" cf. Rev. 3:18), and epichrio (lit. "to rub on" cf. John 9:6).

## 5. THE BIBLICAL VIEW

Though some may disagree, we have given the term "Biblical View:" to that interpretation which regards the instruction of James 5:13-16 as currently valid; and the anointing of oil as symbolic in purpose, even as the water baptism of a believer and the partaking of the Eucharist are symbolic.

Oil in the Scripture is commonly regarded as symbolic of the Holy Spirit. Anointing, through Scripture, was an act of dedication or consecration. Anointing "with oil in the name of the Lord" must certainly signify, then, that complete yieldedness to the infilling of the Holy Spirit that our Lord might have His way in our life, whether in life or in death. If He wills that such a consecrated, Spirit-filled Christian should be healed, that assurance will be given to the elders who pray and they shall have the joy of praying "the prayer of faith" that "shall save the sick."

This view is set forth in greater detail in the two following sections.

## II. EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS

In presenting what appears to be the Biblical view of James 5:13-16, I make recourse only to the words of the text and their interpretation as seen by common New Testament usage. Words and phrases of particular import will naturally be considered in more detail than those that have little or no bearing on the question at hand.

### 1. THE INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED

In considering those to whom the passage is addressed and their particular needs, there are several things that need to be noted from the text.

(1) The provisions for comfort, healing, and forgiveness are restricted, at least as far as this passage is concerned, to those who are Christians. As already pointed out, James is written to those of the household of faith. And, in verses 13 and 14 James specified "is any among you afflicted? Let him pray...is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders..." In both verses the en humin, translated "among you," specifies and limits these provisions to the brethren.

(2) It is to be noted in these same two verses that there are two categories of need and two slightly different means to be used in procuring the answer to those needs. In verse 13 reference is made to those who may be "afflicted." In verse 14 the concern is for those who are "sick." The first of these two terms is the translation of the Greek word kakopatheî, whereas the second is the Greek word astheneî. According to The Expositor's Greek Testament, kakopatheî "refers perhaps rather to mental worry or distress while astheneî refers to some specific bodily ailment."<sup>11</sup> Note that the word translated "afflicted" in verse 16 is also so translated in verse 10. The suggestion seems to be that if any among the Christians are suffering any form of mental anguish they are to seek the answer from the Lord through the privilege and provision of prayer. In seeing the distinc-

tion made here, it may be worthy of noting also that for the "afflicted" the responsibility of prayer is their own, whereas the "sick" are told to call for the elders who will pray for them.

(3) It seems evident that those who are to call for the elders (verse 14) are rather seriously ill. The Greek word astheneo means literally "without strength" but in New Testament usage it is seen to refer especially to those in critical condition. In Luke 7:1-10 the word is used of the Centurion's servant who, according to verse 2, was so ill that he was "ready to die." It was also used of the nobleman's son who was "sick at Capernaum" and also "at the point of death" (John 4:46-47). In John 11 the word is used three times in this form to describe the serious condition of Lazarus, so serious that it resulted in his temporary decease. We find the word also used in Acts 9:37 where we read of Tabitha (Dorcas), that "she was sick, and died." And twice it is used of Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:26-27), of whom we are told "indeed he was sick nigh unto death." The final usage of the word astheneo in the New Testament is that found in our text. Certainly James spoke of illness of a critical sort.

To further support the suggestion of the dire need of the one who is sick we can also note in verse 15 another Greek word translated "sick." This word, kamnonta, can be translated to be "sick" or "weary" and often suggests weariness through extreme exertion, exhaustion, etc. According to some Greek scholars, it therefore often implies a bedfast condition. This suggested bedfast condition may also be implied by the Greek word egerei ("and the Lord shall raise him up").

## 2. THE PROVISION MADE

In examining the instructions and provisions for a Christian who is seriously ill, we must again note several things of importance from the text.

(1) The initiative for any gathering of elders for prayer and anointing is upon the one who is sick. The imperative command proskalesastho is in the middle voice and bears the meaning "to call to oneself." There is certainly no similarity between these plain instructions and the practice of most, if not all, modern "faith healers."

(2) Those to be called to the bedside of the sick one are specifically termed "the elders of the church" (tois presbuterous tes ekklesias).

Incidentally, it may be of interest that The Expositor's Greek Testament suggests that this phrase "points to a developed organization among the communities of the Diaspora, and therefore to a late date for this part of the Epistle."<sup>12</sup>

The principle point of this phrase, for our purpose, is that the ones to be called by the sick person are to be men as indicated by the masculine gender (cf. the prominence of women healers), they are to be from the local church (not itinerating campaigners), and there is to be more than one, as indicated by the plural.

(3) Those who are called to the bedside of the sick one are instructed both to pray over him and to anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The Greek word translated "anointing" is aleipsantes. It is actually an aorist participle and could be more accurately translated "having anointed." The only point being, that in practice the anointing apparently was to precede the

praying for the elders.

Incidentally, not only by ancient practice, but according to the text, to be technical, the oil to be used is olive oil. The word used in the text is elaioi, and is obviously related to elaia, the Greek word for an olive tree.

Finally, let us note that the expression "let them pray over him" is just as expressive in the Greek as it is in the English, and that it seems to picture for us a group of men literally bending over the sick one in earnest intercession for his welfare.

### 3. THE PROMISE GIVEN

Here we see that there is a specific promise given both for the physical healing and the forgiveness of any possible sins.

(1) The promise of healing is not based upon the anointing of oil but upon "the prayer of faith." There must be no mistake about this; no claim is made that the healing power is in the oil. As Lehman Strauss has said, "Actually the 'oil' in James 5:14 would be no different from the muddy waters of the River Jordan into which Naaman was commanded to dip seven times. Naaman was healed of his leprosy in response to his faith and obedience, not because there was any healing power in the waters of Jordan (2 Kings 5:1-14)." 13

And even here, as important as we believe the matter of obedience to be, the text does not even say that obedience in anointing with oil shall save the sick. James said "...the prayer of faith shall save the sick."

(2) That "the prayer of faith" is something very specific is indicated by the presence of the definite article. Literally it is "the prayer of the faith." Many regard this faith as a special endowment from the Lord upon those who are praying when it pleases Him to miraculously heal.

(3) Assurance is given that when "the prayer of faith" has been offered, the sick shall be "saved" and "the Lord shall raise him up." The future tense indicates that though it is not said just when healing would take place, it is certain to follow.

(4) The phrase "and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him" indicates two things; First, that there may be a definite relationship between sin and sickness (cf. I Cor. 11:30), and second, that such a specific relationship may not be the case.

### III. PRACTICAL APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

It is the personal conviction of this writer, based upon the study from the Word of God, and supported both by personal experience and the experiences of others, that we have in James 5:13-16 a precious provision and specific instructions for the healing of saints who are sick. Certain it is that God does not always will healing for a given individual at a given time. Obviously, if we could claim healing for a Christian in every illness (as some faith healers do) then none should ever die. Instructions the Lord has given us concerning prayer in I John 5:14 certainly apply here as they do elsewhere; "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything ac-

ording to His will, He heareth us." And can we not pray in every instance, not only that His will be done, but that our Lord should give us increased faith.

In practice, the following things can be noted in the order indicated by Scripture and honored in experience.

- (1) The calling for the elders of the church by the Christian who is sick.
- (2) The confession of sin, if any, by the ailing Christian.
- (3) The anointing with oil by the elders in the name of Christ.
- (4) The prayer for the sick one by the elders of the Church.
- (5) The bestowal of faith that God will heal, if it be "according to His will."

It should be noted that despite the teachings of some, nothing is said that would preclude the services of doctors or the use of other medical means to aid in healing.

Just as it has been the writer's experience that God has honored obedience to these instructions, it is also his conviction, that since He knows all things, and doeth all things well, our Lord is not so concerned with all the precise details as with the willingness to follow His Word and comply with His desires. Although it is true that He can and does heal in many unique ways, often without either oil or elders, when we can experience the blessings outlined in James 5, we are made to wonder why we should be satisfied with anything less than complete obedience. And may the "prayer of faith" often be our joyous experience!

"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

#### DOCUMENTATION

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10. W. E. Oesterley, "The General Epistle of James," The Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.), IV, p. 473.
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13. Strauss, op. cit., p. 217.