

A Difficult Passage?

Randy Bowling

Some view James 5:13-15 as a difficult passage. Then, again, perhaps it is not difficult. Let us consider it: *“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.”* (James 5:13-14 KJV).

The difficulty arises from the perspective that elders of the church can pray over one who is physically sick and their prayer will cause the Lord to heal the person.

This writer believes there are several problems with the traditional perspective.

One problem is that the context of the passage mainly refers to one's relationship to Christ and continuing to endure for the sake of the hereafter. James makes frequent use of metaphors in the chapter. Verse 7 is one example. Verse 14 is another.

Consider verse 13. James mentions the afflicted should pray and the merry should sing psalms. The context shows these efforts should be directed toward the Lord.

So what does the term, sick, mean in verse 14? James uses the term, sick, metaphorically similarly to the way Paul used the term in 1 Corinthians 11:30: *“For this cause many {are} weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.”* (KJV). Both passages refer to one's relationship to God. The persons to whom the apostles are referring must have had an unsatisfactory relationship to God. Hence, they were spiritually sick and were in danger of eternal death.

Another problem with the traditional perspective is that elders were to be called on behalf of a sick person rather than a physician. Why elders? Because elders would be among the most committed Christians available. Elders should be able to tell the sick person what (s)he needed to do to get right with God. As the person committed him(her)self to God, then the elders could anoint the person *“...with oil in the name of the Lord ...”* showing that God had accepted the person. That is to say that the elders will have been God's representatives or agents. David spoke about God anointing him with oil in Psalms 23:5. David's anointing showed God's acceptance of David after David said God restored David's soul. Hence, the *sick* person would not have been physically sick but spiritually sick.

Yet there is another problem with the traditional perspective. For a moment, let us assume the passage is talking about one who is physically sick. If the elders' praying over one who is physically sick would raise the person to health, then the elders would be doing exactly that much of the time. Yet we see people continually dying from illness and we do not see the elders praying over them. The promise is unqualified, i.e. if the elders pray over the sick person, then the sick person should be healed. So if the admonition is for physically sick folks then either the

praying over them does not really work all the time or the interpretation is wrong. This writer's perspective is the latter.

What **does** *really* work 100% of the time is that God will accept the repentant sinner. The elders can be a real asset in restoring the sinner in his/her relationship to God. Restoring such persons is one of the major roles of shepherds, elders. (Hebrews 13:17)

From a broader perspective, the whole Bible is oriented not toward the physical well-being of those who are faithful to God but rather toward the *spiritual* well-being looking forward to the hereafter. We all know that this life has no promise of tomorrow. Christians know too that God's promises are more concerned about the period after we pass from this life. Those promises are as secure as God Himself.

Still, Christians can and should pray for the sick, i.e. the physically, emotionally, mentally and especially the spiritually sick. Prayers of Christians are important for "...*The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*" (James 5:16).