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One Sunday
morning,
God spoke
to me:
“This is the
day, take
your oil to
church.”

The Prayer of Faith and Healing In James 5

© Roderick A. Graciano 1992-2001
Director, Timothy Ministries
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The Greek and English Texts of James 5.13-18

- 13 Κακοπαθεῖ τις ἐν ὑμῖν; προσευχέσθω· εὐθυμεῖ τις; ψαλλέτω.
14 ἀσθενεῖ τις ἐν ὑμῖν; προσκαλεσάσθω τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας, καὶ προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν ἀλείψαντες [αὐτὸν] ἐλαίῳ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου·
15 καὶ ἡ εὐχὴ τῆς πίστεως σώσει τὸν κάμνοντα,¹ καὶ ἐγερεῖ αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος· κὰν ἁμαρτίας ἦ πεπονηκώς, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ.
16 ἐξομολογεῖσθε οὖν ἀλλήλοις τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ εὐχεσθε ὑπὲρ ἀλλήλων, ὅπως ἰαθῆτε.² πολὺ ἰσχύει δέησις δικαίου ἐνεργουμένη.
17 Ἡλίας ἄνθρωπος ἦν ὁμοιοπαθῆς ἡμῖν, καὶ προσευχῆ προσηύξατο³ τοῦ μὴ βρέξει, καὶ οὐκ ἔβρεξεν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐνιαυτοὺς τρεῖς καὶ μῆνας ἕξ·
18 καὶ πάλιν προσηύξατο, καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς ὑετὸν ἔδωκεν καὶ ἡ γῆ ἐβλάστησεν τὸν καρπὸν αὐτῆς.⁴

* * *

- 13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises.
14 Is anyone among you sick? 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;
15 and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.
16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.
17 Elijah was a man 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.
18 And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit.⁵

Thesis

James’ teaching on the prayer of faith (ἡ εὐχὴ τῆς πίστεως) is based squarely on the teaching of Jesus as later recorded in Mark 11.22-25 and Matthew 21.21,22. Faith in this context is an undoubting assurance that God will grant a *specific* prayer. Such undoubting assurance is a gift from God, acquired by petitioners only as they discern God’s will with regard to a specific prayer concern. The pursuit of this discernment is a discipline encouraged by such passages as 1 John 5.14,15, and is based on the presupposition that God still speaks to His people today about their specific circumstances. In this passage, James focuses upon physiological healing, but his teaching reveals God’s concern for the whole person.

The Problem

David O’Brien raises a painfully familiar question to state the problem with James’ healing passage: “The Bible says we will be healed if we have the elders of the church pray for us. Why doesn’t God heal everyone we pray for (James 5:14-16)?”⁶ As a church elder for many years I’ve faced this mystery repeatedly. James’ statement seems straightforward and unequivocal: “the prayer offered in faith *will* restore the one who is sick.” We’ve done much introspection, however, since many whom we’ve anointed with oil and prayed for have *not* been healed. Did we lack faith? Did we pray with impure motives? Was the sick person hiding unconfessed sin? Should we have used real olive oil? Does God not heal this way after the apostolic age? Have we completely misunderstood what James was driving at? The many questions raised by our unsuccessful prayers for healing, have tempted us to throw up our hands in defeat and avoid the James 5 passage altogether, and that brings us to

the real problem, i.e., the spiritual problem of this text: Satan does not wish us to implement the transforming principles of James 5! It is in the hope of overcoming his devices and of transforming lives for Christ's sake by "the prayer of faith" that I present the following teaching.

Differing Views of James' Healing Passage

Power in the Oil

As the church has wrestled with James' healing passage through the centuries, many contrasting interpretations of have emerged. Morton T. Kelsey summarizes a sacramental understanding of the anointing oil as held by the church in the fourth century:

Besides services for visiting the sick, there were also prayers for sanctifying the oil and other objects which might be used to convey healing. *Bishop Sarapion's Prayer-Book* (IV.17) and the *Apostolic Constitutions* (VIII.29) both provided special prayers at the Eucharist for blessing oil, bread, or even water for the sick, which were then taken to sick persons to heal them. Oil in particular was a "sacramental" that could heal when power was given through the prayers and sacraments of the church.⁷

Working from the sacramental presupposition, contemporaries of Athanasius would have viewed the sanctified oil as a key to James' promise of healing. Were they with us today, fourth-century ecclesiastics might blame our ineffective application of the James text on the Protestant indifference toward holy objects and substances. After all, aren't there scriptural precedents for handkerchiefs conveying healing in passages like Acts 19.11,12? We can't help but turn away in revulsion from such sacramental thinking, however, for the idea of "magical" oil carries the smell of that religious synthesis with pagan rituals that occurred in the Constantinian world. We return to the standard of the Bible and find that God only used objects as vehicles of His grace when those objects could point people's hearts directly back to Him as the true source of spiritual blessing. Oil, and other objects, correctly used can still do that, but we are repulsed by the superstitious practices in the early church that led people to place their faith in the oil rather than in God. Such practices not only inclined the populace toward idolatry, but also made them vulnerable to the abuses of a corrupt clergy. Christ began his teaching in Mark 11.22-25 with the words, "Have faith in God." We must remain committed to this God-ward orientation. Let us anoint with oil as James instructs, but let us avoid doing it in any way that distracts people from faith toward God. The power is not in the oil!

Spiritual Healing Only

The upheaval of the barbarian conquests brought the theological pendulum swinging back the other direction from the church's early inclination toward the magical. We see antisupernaturalist leanings all around us today, but there were also such tendencies among theologians in the dark ages, even while the general populace remained grossly superstitious. Morton Kelsey carefully traces the forces that compelled western, medieval theologians to decide "there was no need for God to continue to break through into the lives of men." Giant intellects like Thomas Aquinas expounded a world view in which "one might expect no further revelations or healings as the natural interaction of man and God, but only under extraordinary conditions."⁸ Though reports of healings continued among the laity of the time, the sacerdotal emphasis shifted from healing to forgiveness of sin. In the mind of the church, the focus of the James passage became spiritual restoration rather than physical.

This interpretation from the dark ages remains popular today, even among non-Catholics. Can we support it exegetically? The Greek terms translated *sick*, *sick person*, and *healed* are used metaphorically in the epistles and in the prophets (as translated in the Septuagint). Is it possible that James wrote a metaphorical prescription for spiritual illness, describing a ceremony for spiritual healing that he never intended to be applied to physical disease?

To answer this question we must recognize the thoroughly Hebraic nature of James' epistle.

James was a Jew writing to Jews in a Jewish style, following Jewish thought patterns.⁹ This implies that James would never have intended the distinctions between body and soul that so readily arise in western minds, but rather would have written from a holistic view of man. For a first-century Jew, discussion of sin and forgiveness would have entered naturally into the context of teaching on bodily sickness and healing. James certainly understood the integration of the soul and body and how the health of one affected the other. A prescription for *spiritual* illness is naturally and necessarily part of James' healing passage, but far from excluding a doctrine of physical restoration, it neatly integrates it.

Besides the Hebraic character of the epistle, the very wording of our James context refutes the "spiritual healing" view. Though we could interpret his terms for sickness and healing metaphorically, James gives no grammatical signals that we should do so. The context does not point to metaphorical healing as it does, for example, in Hebrews 12.13. In Hebrews 12, the author exhorts us to "run with perseverance" the race of holiness (v. 1). To that end he exhorts us to throw off our sins and endure hardship and divine discipline (vv. 1-11). In the midst of this context about running the spiritual race and growing in holiness the author says, "Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed." The whole context of Hebrews 12 inclines us to understand the *strengthening* and *healing* of the lame in verses 12 and 13 as speaking metaphorically of *spiritual healing*. Such is not the case with the context of James 5. Therefore, since each of James' terms have primary reference to the physical, and are almost universally so used in the gospels and Acts, we must require an appropriate grammatical signal before we take James other than literally. Consider, for example, James' phrase, "the Lord will raise him up." These words demand a physical understanding of the passage because the verb used (ἐγείρω = *egeiro*) speaks of a physical event in all but two of its more than one hundred New Testament occurrences. In the two exceptions where Paul uses *egeiro*, he makes it a very specific and clearly intended "spiritual awakening" metaphor (Romans 13.11; Ephesians 5.14).

A further and fatal weakness of the "ceremony for spiritual healing" view is that it has no corroboration in the New Testament. Anointing with oil has various biblical connotations, but nowhere do we find it used for some ritual of "soul healing." On the other hand, the precedent in Mark 6.13 implies that the instructions in James are founded on the apostolic tradition of *physical* healing. The apostles anointed people with oil when they healed their *physical* diseases: church elders are called to anoint in the course of the same ministry.

Finally, while this "spiritual illness" view provides a convenient explanation for why so many elders' prayers for *physical* healing have gone unanswered, James' grammar contradicts this easy solution.¹⁰ The conditional clause in James 5.15 ("and if he has committed sins") is a third class condition, the class of probability. This means two important things: (1) sin is *probable* in the sick person's life, but (2) absence of sin is *possible!* The fact that sin *may be absent* implies that spiritual illness may also be absent. Unless a person can be spiritually ill without the presence of sin, the *possibility* of sin's absence implies again that physical illness and healing, not sin and spiritual illness, are in view.

Physical Healing Only For A Sickness Resulting from Sin

David E. O'Brien presents a variation on the "spiritual healing only" approach. It boils down to the idea of "physical healing only when spiritual healing is needed." In his own words: "I believe that James was dealing with situations where sickness was the result of sin and healing was to be expected when the sin had been dealt with."¹¹ He goes on to explain that though God can heal when the illness has nothing to do with sin, He probably won't since modern healing doesn't signal the dawn of the messianic age like healing in the first century did:

I think that's why people who pray for healing are often left in their sickness. The power to heal is there. The pity and love that Jesus displayed when He healed during the days of his earthly ministry are there. But the sign isn't.¹²

While the theory of "healings as primarily a messianic sign" warrants discussion, it is an eschatological rabbit trail skirting the context of James 5. With regard to the James passage itself,

O'Brien's essential thesis becomes clear: James only addressed the situation of people who were physically sick because of sin in their lives, and therefore those are the only class of people to whom we should apply James' instructions for healing. However, the same arguments that contradict the preceding theory also demolish this one. The James 5 passage simply cannot be limited to spiritual illnesses nor physical maladies resulting from sin!

Last Rites? That's Extreme!

It's amazing what extremes of biblical interpretation we can resort to once we've abandoned sound principles of hermeneutics. The medieval idea that the James passage referred to spiritual illness only, led directly to the Romanist concept of Last Rites or Extreme Unction. Kelsey notes how "those who completed the *Summa Theologica* for Aquinas added this final touch:

'Extreme Unction is a spiritual remedy, since it avails for the remission of sins, according to James 5.15. Therefore it is a sacrament...Now the effect intended in the administration of the sacraments is the healing of the disease of sin.'" (III-Supp. 29.1)¹³

The idea of spiritual healing had now evolved into a ritual only for those *in extremis*, i.e. at the point of death! Ken Blue notes the great irony that "the prayer offered in faith to 'make the sick person well' (James 5:15) was reinterpreted to say 'make the sick soul well from sin' in preparation for *the death of the body*."¹⁴ Such an interpretation of the James healing passage will simply not stand up to a non-Catholic hermeneutic, that is, to a non-Catholic system of presuppositions. Nor will the next interpretation stand up to a *non-dispensational* hermeneutic.¹⁵

Physical Healing, But Only For The Apostolic Era

I will not in this paper explore a dispensational perspective of divine healing *per se*, but any interpretation of James 5.13-18 does hinge upon one's presuppositions about miraculous manifestations in general. We will have to dismiss the James passage as inapplicable to us if we believe as Calvin regrettably did that,

The grace of healing has disappeared, like all the other miraculous powers, which the Lord was pleased to exhibit for a time, that he might render the preaching of the gospel, which was then new, the object of admiration for ever. Even though we should fully grant, therefore, that unction was a sacrament of the powers which were administered by the instrumentality of the apostles, it has nothing to do with us, to whom the administration of those powers has not been committed.¹⁶

Ironically, powerful exegete that Calvin was, he could not support his doctrine of the cessation of miracles *biblically*. The subsequent dispensational attempts to build support for such a doctrine, with passages like 1 Corinthians 13.8-10, crumble under the hammer of sound exegesis. In fact, the strongest argument for the cessation of miracles and charismatic gifts is not biblical but historical. Charismatic manifestations did seem to wane as the Constantinian church compromised with paganism. However, a historical argument has the same weakness as any argument from experience: it is open to diverse interpretations. The fact that miracles waned in history does not preclude their waxing today! On the contrary, if we will let the Scriptures speak without the restraint of historical, experiential or denominational biases, then we must seek an understanding of the James passage that not only recognizes the focus upon physical healing, but also maintains the possibility of such healing occurring today.

Does God Intend To Heal Every Believer Now?

On the other end of the hermeneutical teeter-totter, some have so zealously taken up the conviction that divine healing is for today, that they have adopted the idea that God wills to heal everybody, or at least every believer, now! They take the James passage at face value, while working from the presupposition that God is willing to grant healing to all who request it. The corollary to this presupposition is that, if someone who requests healing doesn't receive it, there has to be something wrong with *their* faith, for after all, James promises that the prayer of *faith* will save the sick person.

The first problem with this approach is in finding scriptural support for the premise of God's willingness to heal every believer. There is no question that healing is a facet of God's

character (Exodus 15.26), and of Christ's (Luke 4.18; Mat. 14.14). Nor is there any doubt that Christ's atonement purchased the redemption of even our physical bodies (Mat. 8.17; Romans 8.23; Phil. 3.20,21). However, no scripture states explicitly that it is always, in every circumstance, God's will to heal immediately. On the contrary, such a belief flies in the face of the biblical record of God-honoring people ailing, and sometimes dying of disease,¹⁷ even after God has been fervently sought with apostolic faith (2 Corinthians 12.7-10). The Bible clearly reveals that God often has deeper purposes in illness that result in a delay if not a complete postponement of his healing.

The second problem with this universal-healing-now approach is its definition of faith. If God always wills to heal immediately, the reason for continuing illness must ultimately be the subjects own lack of faith—but faith in what? Faith in God's ability to heal? Pretty much everybody who prays believes God *can* heal. Faith in God's universal willingness to heal immediately? Great, but upon what foundation can that belief be based? Sadly, this approach tends to promote a concept of blind faith for which no basis is required. This blind faith quickly evolves into a spiritual emotion, dredged up from within, completely subjective and akin to New Age positive thinking: If we just believe hard enough whatever we want will come true—never mind that we have no scriptural promise or other divine guidance to work from; it's the inner quality of our faith that's important. When we don't get what we want with this kind of "faith," it's because we're just not believing hard enough.¹⁸ This formula of faith has provided the back door for many a bogus faith healer.

In addition to these two problems, we must also realize that a doctrine of universal-healing-now limits our openness to God's creative interaction with us as much as a no-healing view. God is immutable in His essential character, but He remains infinitely creative in His works and deals uniquely with each of His children. We cannot look at Peter's life, and assume that God will take John down the same road. We must expect God to exercise greater freedom than that in His dealings with us.

Prayer of Faith = Faithful Prayer

In the interest of assuring God of his freedom to deal with us according to his sovereign creativity, we have often closed our prayers for healing with the formula, "Thy will be done." We have avoided praying for healing in any manner that might seem directive. "God forbid," we cry in holy horror, "that we should ever sound as though we were telling the Lord of the universe what to do!" Instead, we humbly acknowledge God's sovereignty and holy purposes in the illness, and His prerogative in answering "according to His will." In spite of the seeming piety of this approach, however, we have unconsciously downgraded James' prayer of faith into something more generic: we have made it into a basic "faithful prayer" or "prayer of hope."

I don't disparage faithful prayers. Prayer in an attitude of faithful submission is always good. In fact, *all* prayer should be faithful. That's why we know James was calling for something distinct.¹⁹ He pointedly promises that the kind of prayer he's talking about *will heal the sick person*. We either have to believe that all humble, submissive prayers for healing will be granted, or that the prayer of faith in James is something different. Since we've already rejected the former hypothesis, we have to conclude that James meant something different than a "faithful prayer" —not necessarily something better, just something different.

Understanding James' Prayer of Faith

The Concept Defined in James 1

It's ironic that the church has so wrestled over what James meant by the prayer of faith in chapter five, when he actually defined the idea in chapter 1 of the same epistle. Staring at James' healing passage in textual isolation perplexes us, but the light dawns as we compare scripture with related scripture. When James instructs us in chapter 1.5-8 to *pray in faith for wisdom*, he clarifies what he means: we should pray without doubting, i.e. without debating in our hearts whether God is disposed to answer this prayer.²⁰ The prayer of faith in James is a prayer of undoubting "expectation that what is asked for will be granted by [God]."²¹

The Concept Based on Christ's Teaching

This concept of an undoubting prayer of faith is squarely based on Christ's teaching as recorded in

Mark 11.22-25 and its parallel passage, Matthew 21.21,22. The connection with James' doctrine is clearly seen as we examine the Greek text of these two passages:

Greek

Mark 11.22 καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει αὐτοῖς, Ἐχετε πίστιν θεοῦ, 23 ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ὅς ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ, Ἐρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, καὶ μὴ **διακριθῆ**²² ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ ἀλλὰ **πιστεύῃ** ὅτι ὁ λαλεῖ γίνεται, ἔσται αὐτῷ. 24 διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν, πάντα ὅσα προσεύχεσθε καὶ **αἰτεῖσθε, πιστεύετε** ὅτι ἐλάβετε,²³ καὶ ἔσται ὑμῖν. 25 καὶ ὅταν στήκετε προσευχόμενοι, ἀφίετε εἴ τι ἔχετε κατὰ τινος, ἵνα καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ἀφῆ ὑμῖν τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν.

NASB

Mark 11.22 And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. 23 "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not **doubt** in his heart, but **believes** that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him. 24 "Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and **ask, believe** that you have received them, and they shall be granted you. 25 "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your transgressions."

Greek

Matthew 21.21 ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν καὶ μὴ **διακριθῆτε**, οὐ μόνον τὸ τῆς συκῆς ποιήσετε, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ εἴπητε, Ἐρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, γενήσεται· 22 καὶ πάντα ὅσα ἂν αἰτήσητε ἐν τῇ **προσευχῇ πιστεύοντες** λήψεσθε.

NASB

Matthew 21.21 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not **doubt**, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it shall happen. 22 "And all things you ask in **prayer, believing**, you shall receive."

Matthew 21.22 establishes that Christ taught about the prayer of faith. Granted, Matthew doesn't use the exact phrase "the prayer of faith" (ἡ εὐχή τῆς πίστεως); he speaks of believing while asking in prayer (ἐν τῇ προσευχῇ πιστεύοντε). The Greek text helps us see the equivalency of the idea in the two phrases as we note that the word translated *faith* in James and the word translated *believing* in Matthew are in fact the noun and verb forms of the same term. To pray "the prayer of faith," and to be "*faithing* while we pray" are surely the same idea. The connection of these passages with James' doctrine is further established by the fact that Christ explicitly taught about a prayer *without doubt*. Further, we see that Mark recorded this teaching using the same key terms (*ask, faith, doubt*) as in James 1.6 (αἰτείτω δὲ ἐν πίστει, μηδὲν διακρινόμενος)²⁴. In fact, the term for doubt, *diakrino* (διακρίνω), ties these passages very tightly together. *Diakrino* was not used with the meaning "to doubt" (in its passive and middle form) before the New Testament, and this usage swiftly disappeared after the first century.²⁵ As a verb meaning *to doubt*, *diakrino* is part of that vocabulary which is uniquely New

Testament in its usage.²⁶ Of its 11 passive or middle occurrences in the New Testament, two are used by James and another two are in Matthew 21.21 and Mark 11.23.²⁷ James was well acquainted with the teachings of Jesus, particularly as recorded in Matthew,²⁸ and it becomes apparent that his “prayer of faith” is nothing different from that taught by Christ.²⁹ The prayer of faith is a prayer without doubt that God will grant the thing requested!

How To Pray Without Doubt

The Failure of Purely Subjective Models

Now how does one pray without doubt? How does one pray with “the assurance of things hoped for, *the conviction* of things not seen”? Certainly not on the basis of a subjective faith emotionally dredged up from within. The Bible never teaches that just believing hard enough in something will make it so. Those who are duped into a doctrine of “faith in faith” are doomed to lose their “faith” because of its inefficacy.³⁰ Subjective, “name-it-and-claim-it,” selfish kinds of faith will ultimately crumble into doubt. They cannot sustain what Jesus and James called the prayer of faith. The doubt-free prayer can only be sustained by *a knowledge of God’s will regarding the matter prayed for*.

The Prayer of Faith Must Be Based on God’s Will

Another way to say, “pray without doubting,” is to say: “pray and *know* that you will receive what you ask for.” 1 John 5.14,15 tells us how we can pray with such knowing assurance that our request will be granted: “And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.” Upon reflection we realize that doubt indeed dogs our heels as we pray selfishly, but falls behind as we pray according to God’s will. If we ask Him, God will certainly give us what He himself desires us to have.³¹ Once we understand God’s will in a matter, we can pray in conformity to it, and know without doubt that God will grant the request.

This brings us to the ultimate question touching the prayer of faith in James 5: How can we know God’s will regarding specific cases of illness? We’ve already acknowledged that we have no biblical promise that God is willing to heal everybody immediately. Without an explicit declaration in Scripture that God wills to heal “Sue Smith” now, how can we gain assurance of God’s will in order to pray the prayer of faith for “Sue”? The answer is that we must seek God directly, in the ways that the Bible teaches us to seek Him.

Discerning God’s Will In Situations Not Explicitly Addressed By The Bible

Beginning With Biblical Commands And Principles

Any quest for God’s will begins with fervently petitioning Him to reveal it. The next step, of course, is to apply to our situation any explicit commands or applicable principles³² recorded in Scripture. Once we have thoroughly searched out applicable commands and principles, we must then look more deeply into the Scriptures to consider whether we might find some direction in what the Bible—and our experience of biblical truth—reveals about God’s ways and character.

Discerning On The Basis Of God’s Ways And Character

We can know God’s will without an explicit statement of it in the same way that my children can know my will in a wide array of situations that I have never talked to them about. My children know my will because they have a *close personal knowledge of me*. If my daughter Rachel should decide on her way home to pick up some ice cream to surprise her Dad with, she does not have to wonder whether I would wish her to get the regular kind or the sugar-free. I have never told her, “Rachel, if you ever decide to buy me some ice cream, get the sugar-free.” However, she knows me well enough to know of my allergy to refined sucrose, and she knows without an explicit message from me that I would “will” her to get the sugar-free.

This discernment of a person’s will based on an intimate knowledge of the person is how David knew it was God’s will to kill Goliath. Having analyzed the military situation, David recognized the Philistine challenge as a reproach against the Living God. Having discerned that, David fell back on his

intimate knowledge of God, and knew that God “willed” to erase that reproach and would honor the Israelite champion who would take initiative to do so in God’s name. Nowhere in 1 Samuel 17 do we read that “God said to David, ‘attack Goliath and I will give him into your hands.’” David knew what God willed and what God would do based not on explicit words from heaven, but on countless hours spent with God in the Judean hills defending a flock of sheep from lions and bears.

I once had an opportunity to apply this principle of discernment in a much less strategic situation. A Christian friend of mine, recovering from financial problems, once had his car break down irreparably. When he did the responsible thing and refused to go further into debt by buying a car on credit, his unbelieving sister mocked him. “Do you think God’s just going to drop a car in your driveway,” she asked. When my friend related this conversation to me, a feeling like warm oil flowed down over my shoulders and a grin welled up from my heart and spread across my face. I suddenly knew that this was a stage set by God. It was more than a feeling. I saw the parallel between my friend’s situation and biblical ones in which God had been mocked (cf. Daniel 3.15 b; 2 Kings 18.17-19.37). I knew how God responded to such challenges and I instantly knew God’s will in my friend’s situation. I said, “You know what we’re going to do? We’re going to ask God to drop a car in your driveway!” We prayed with joyful assurance, and within the week someone donated a *nice* car to our organization. We signed it over to my needy friend, and oh how we enjoyed hearing about his faithless sister going bananas. For a day or two she phoned her brother every couple of hours to ask him again how he had gotten the car—she was stunned. The Holy Spirit was clearly working in her life through this event.

*Discerning Through Charismatic Gifts And Manifestations*³³

Indeed, the Holy Spirit delights to work in our crises, and as we seek Him, He will sometimes speak to us even more directly than He does through Scripture and godly discernment. The prophecy of Joel, as interpreted by Peter in Acts 2, teaches that we are in the Age of the Spirit. Joel’s prophecy describes an era that *culminates* with “the great and glorious day of the Lord,” and which Peter declares as *having begun* that Pentecost day. It follows that we are now *in that era* which Joel calls “the last days” (Acts 2.17). These last days are characterized by charismatic manifestations among God’s people; manifestations including dreams and visions, and particularly prophecy (Acts 2.17,18). The Scriptures abound with testimonies of how God has spoken to His people in time of crisis through such manifestations (e.g., Acts 27.23), as well as through what Paul calls the “word of wisdom,” and “word of knowledge” (1 Cor. 12.7-11). It follows that when we seek God’s will in a crisis of physical or spiritual health, we should remain open to the possibility that He will speak to us directly by His Holy Spirit.

Isn’t It Dangerous To Rely On Personal Revelations?

Some will object to the idea that the Holy Spirit still speaks to people directly. Doesn’t this threaten the unique authority of Scripture? In their zeal for the primacy of the Bible, certain theological camps will reject any revelation of God’s will for which a chapter and verse cannot be given. They will insist that God speaks *only* through what the written text of the Bible says or clearly implies.³⁴ Ironically, such biblical absolutism is unbiblical. We must return to the spirit of the Westminster Confession that so beautifully states:

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.³⁵

The Westminster Assembly wisely did not make the Scripture the only vehicle of the Spirit, but rather the *supreme judge* of all other vehicles. The Reformers’ doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* was never intended in the absolute sense of “the Scriptures only,” as though the letter of Scripture could exhaustively contain the Spirit of the resurrected Christ, but rather as meaning, “the Scriptures are the *only* judge.” *Sola Scriptura* “refers to the fact that all Christian teaching on faith and morals is to be based on the truth of the Bible,” or in the words of Timothy George, “all church teaching must be normed by the Bible.”³⁶ This understanding of the Bible’s authority will

man. Furthermore, it will encourage us to cry out to God for personal guidance in our current crises.³⁷

Isn't It Wrong To Demand That God Speak To Us?

Someone might yet object that it's not fitting to press God to reveal His will.³⁸ We should simply "let God be God," and "let God's will be done." (Back to the "faithful prayer" idea.) However, it is one thing to caution against seeking God *wrongly*, and it is another to caution against seeking Him at all. There is more than one motive for seeking God's will and more than one attitude in which to seek it. If we are demanding to know God's will because we refuse to accept His providence, we sin. On the other hand, God grieves when we yield to circumstances without seeking Him (cf. 2 Chronicles 16.12), and delights to have us search out His will when we are doing so for His glory. God allows certain crisis to come into our lives expressly so that we *will* seek out His heart in the matter, and in the process come personally to a deeper understanding of His character. God could accomplish all of His purposes without a whimper from us, but He chooses to work through prayer because He wants us to enter His presence through that discipline. God's ultimate desire for us is that we come to know Him intimately, and to accomplish that end He would rather that we seek Him with wrong attitudes, and come to know Him better in the painful process of slamming up against His character, than that we not seek Him at all. Nowhere in the Bible does God say, "Please, let Me be Me," as though our foolish demands could possibly hem Him in. Instead He says, "Seek Me!" (Psalm 27.8). The Bible gives ample assurance that God is able to interrupt us when our prayers take a wrong direction or attitude (see Joshua 7.1-12).

God desires that we seek Him and He has a million ways to answer us when we do. Yes, every word we receive subjectively from Him must be brought to the touchstone of the received canon of Scripture,³⁹ but though the Bible is our starting point and our constant guide along the way, it is not the end of our spiritual journey—our end and high calling is to know Christ intimately (Philippians 3.10). If we would pray the prayer of faith of James 5, if we would pray a prayer for divine healing that is not dogged by doubt, we must not fear an intimate, subjective encounter with the Living God. We must earnestly seek Him, listening first to His voice in the Scriptures, but then also keeping our ears open for any other manner in which His Spirit may choose to speak.

The Biblical Model

Let me summarize again the model I'm proposing for the prayer of faith: James' prayer of faith is a prayer based on discernment of God's will, made with undoubting assurance that a specific request will be granted, and that accomplishes a holy and definite end. Let me outline the process this way, based on James 1.5,6:

1. We discern God's will for a specific situation (James reveals that God willingly gives wisdom for the specific scenario of facing trials).
2. On that basis we are able to pray with assurance for a definite request (James urges us to pray, without doubting, for the specific gift of wisdom).
3. Our prayer accomplishes its holy and definite end (James promises that wisdom will be given).

At first glance, this three-step sequence may seem so simple, or in part so obvious, that it hardly warrants discussion. The deletion of any step in the sequence, however, completely changes the prayer concept. If we scratch the first step, and do not require that our prayer begin with discernment of God's will, then we are left with the generic "faithful prayer" idea, or worse, a hit-and-miss, or shot-in-the-dark type prayer, or a suspect concept of faith since it has no connection to God's will. Likewise, if we delete step two, and do not pray with assurance for a definite response from God, it implies that we have probably also skipped step one and have contented ourselves with the "faithful prayer" approach, or we have discerned God's will but haven't understood that He intends to implement it through our fervent prayers. If we are willing to leave out the third step of definite fulfillment, we have either settled again for a more generic prayer idea, or have not understood God's call to persistence once we have launched a prayer of faith.⁴⁰ Each part of the sequence is crucial.

We will examine a prayer in the Bible that follows this sequence, but first let's note that the prayer of faith is only one kind out of an infinite variety of acts of faith. There are myriad different kinds of steps of faith we could take, with definite and holy results, assuming God first provided a basis for those

steps by indicating His will. Hebrews 11 lists example after example of this model. Noah, for one, is commended for building the ark as an act of faith. What was the sequence of this event?

1. God revealed His will by telling Noah outright to build the ark,
2. “Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did” (evidence of his undoubting faith),
3. Noah accomplished the definite end of his holy task, completing the ark and saving his family.

Likewise, Abraham discerned God’s will that he should father a nation, acted with faith (both in God’s promise and in God’s character), and accomplished the definite end of fathering Isaac. Barak discerned God’s will through the prophetic word of Deborah, set aside his doubts sufficiently to go into battle by faith, and accomplished the defeat of the Canaanites. We see that whether we are talking about prayer or any other spiritual work, acts of faith are accomplished in a consistent sequence: discernment of God’s will, confident action, achievement of a definite divine goal.⁴¹

The sequence appears clearly in the historical prayer that James himself refers to in our context, the prayer of Elijah for rain. James does not explicitly label this as a prayer of faith; he offers it as an example of the effective prayer of a righteous man, mortal like ourselves. Yet James gives this example as an encouragement for us to pray for one another’s healing. Since this follows directly upon his instructions involving the prayer of faith, it is inconceivable that James would share it as a prayer qualitatively different from what he was just writing about. When we go back to 1 Kings 18 to study the details of Elijah’s prayer for rain, we find God revealing His will to Elijah in the first verse of the chapter: “Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the face of the earth.” After the drama with the prophets of Baal, Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel (overlooking the Mediterranean from above the present port of Haifa) and prayed for God to send rain as He said He would. When Elijah’s servant went to gaze out over the sea, from whence the rain would have to come, he saw nothing auspicious, nothing at all. Nevertheless, Elijah did not doubt, but sent the servant back to look out over the sea seven times, until he finally saw the cloud rise from the sea that heralded the desired deluge. “The sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on,” and Elijah received the definite fulfillment of his prayer of faith.⁴²

To the example from Elijah’s life, we can add one from Daniel’s. Daniel discerned from the prophecies of Jeremiah that he was within two years of the Lord’s time for restoring Jerusalem (1st year of Darius, 538 B.C. to 70th year of exile, 536 B.C.). It fills me with awe to read how these holy men understood God’s revelation of His intentions not as cause to lean back and spectate, but as a catalyst to pray with all their hearts that God would do what He said He would! Armed with his understanding of God’s will for the restoration of Judah, Daniel pled with fasting, in sackcloth and ashes, that the Lord would look with favor once again upon His desolate sanctuary. Not only did Daniel live to see Cyrus’ first-year decree to rebuild the temple and the beginning of the Jews’ return from exile (cf. Ezra 1 with Daniel 10.1), but his very prayer was interrupted by Gabriel with the sequel to Jeremiah’s revelation! Daniel discerned God’s will, he prayed in faith, and received the specific fulfillment of his prayers.

I believe that many other examples of this pattern for the prayer of faith could be offered from scripture, if the Spirit had seen fit to hand down to us the details of the three steps in each case. For example, we must admit that Christ’s cursing of the fig tree was a prayer of faith, since it was the occasion for his teaching on the subject. We see the act of faith, i.e., an undoubting command to the tree, and we see the definite fulfillment, but we don’t have the details on just how Jesus discerned the Father’s will at the front end of the process. We may assume He just knew it, being the second person of the Trinity, but Jesus repeatedly testifies to acting in accordance with an ongoing discernment from the Father (John 5.19; 8.28; 14.31). Likewise, in Acts 1, we see God the Son revealing His will to the apostles regarding their baptism in the Holy Spirit, and then the definite accomplishment of that will in Acts 2, but nothing explicit about the apostles praying for that accomplishment in between—only the record that they were waiting for the promise very prayerfully (Acts 1.4,5,12-14). To the examples of the prayer of faith in Scripture, varied in explicitness as they may be, let me add a personal experience.

Experiencing The Prayer Of Faith

In the first summer of our marriage, our limited income made it necessary for us to seek the

Lord about a cracked tooth Kaaren had. We did not have the money for the crown that the dentist prescribed, nor did we feel the freedom to beg or borrow the funds from anyone. While Kaaren avoided chewing on the bad tooth, we sought the Lord for several weeks. We reminded Him of His promises to provide for us, and acknowledged that He was able to provide the money for the crown or to heal the tooth directly. Finally, one Sunday morning, God spoke to me, not in a voice audible to anyone else, but with an inward impression of words upon my brain of such force and clarity, that they might as well have been audible. I had been communing with the Lord about Kaaren's need as I was preparing for church when the sentence suddenly resounded within my mind, immediately echoing so that I heard it twice: "This is the day, take your oil to church." End of transmission. The communication was brief, but it told me all that I needed to know. I knew the Spirit was alluding to the very passage I'm discussing in this paper. I knew that we should go to church and ask the elders to anoint Kaaren with oil and ask God for her healing. The Lord had answered our prayers for a revelation of His will.

The church we attended at the time was far from charismatic. In some respects it was far from Christian, since the pastor doubted the resurrection of Christ. Nevertheless, the two elders who were believers, readily agreed to pray for Kaaren after the morning service. They did so, dabbing on some of the cooking oil that we'd brought from home, and specifically asking God to heal her tooth. Kaaren described to me afterwards that, as they prayed, she felt a warm feeling begin at one corner of her jaw and move around the front of her face to the other side. When we got home, she discovered that she could eat normally without any pain; God had granted the definite fulfillment of the prayer of faith.⁴³

The Practical Application For A Modern Team Of Elders

Having experienced this model for the prayer of faith predisposes me toward it, I suppose, but more important considerations convince me that this is the model we should pursue in practice. Not the least of these is the fact that we do have biblical examples of the "act of faith" sequence I've described, while other "faith" models lack biblical precedent. Furthermore, this model is consistent with James' explicit promise of healing, while other models fail to explain satisfactorily the frequent failure of the promise. Perhaps most importantly, this model is the only one that biblically addresses the doubt issue raised in Christ's teaching on the prayer of faith. Persuaded as I am that James' teaching is based on Christ's, I am compelled to accept the discernment/specific-prayer/definite-fulfillment sequence as the model for the prayer of faith in James 5.

Now the exciting part! Given this understanding of the prayer of faith, how should a modern team of elders apply the instructions of James 5.13-18?

Our Default Stance Toward Divine Healing

Having rejected the idea that God wills to heal everyone, we must nevertheless take note of the wide open invitation to the sick in James 5.14: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call..." While the invitation is limited to anyone *among you*, i.e., within the congregation of the faithful, it is not limited by any other criteria of age, spirituality or circumstances of the illness. The implication of this universal invitation to sick believers is that our beginning assumption as elders or pastors is that God *definitely* wills to minister to the sick through our prayers, and *probably* intends to heal them. After all, Christ "took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Mat. 8.17), and came to announce "release to the oppressed" and the era "of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4.18,19). In this Age of the Spirit we have every reason to expect that God would be pleased to heal his sick children, and James's invitation encourages us in that regard.

Call A Plurality Of Elders

We can readily grasp why James instructed that we call for the elders of the church, as opposed to simply calling for a handful of believers or even for someone with gifts of healing (1 Cor. 12.9). While healing is part of who God is (Exodus 15.26), and God encourages us in our James passage to seek Him for healing, His priority is not healing but holiness (Psalm 119.67,71). It stands to reason then that when God shouts at us in our pains, as C. S. Lewis' would say, it behooves us to seek out those in the best position to exhort

and counsel us with regard to our souls, both by virtue of their spiritual maturity and of their intimacy with our spiritual lives. In an ideal church, those individuals would be the leaders who shepherd us, i.e., elders or pastors.⁴⁴ In the first-century church, those elders would have been unpaid spiritual leaders who had long been in their community. Relationships between these indigenous leaders and their sheep were probably deep, with long histories. James envisioned the elders praying for church members whom they knew well, faults and all. With such a level of familiarity between the elders and the congregation, the elders would have been well suited to discern how God might be dealing with an individual church member through an illness. This underscores the importance for us as western Christians of the 21st century to cultivate deep spiritual relationships with our pastoral overseers. Having done so, our first response to any serious illness should be to turn to these shepherds for their help in discerning any spiritual roots to our problem.

We also see the wisdom in calling for a plurality of elders as opposed to calling for just one. Besides the obvious advantage of “more eyes” for the purpose of discerning, the call for a plurality of intercessors points to an important principle of prayer: guarding God’s glory from being attached to God’s agent. Church history is littered with the dramatic, yet deplorable, stories of “Christian” prophets and faith-healers who made a name for themselves while actually obscuring the character of Christ. Only the mightiest of saints, like an Elisha or a Paul, seem to have successfully resisted taking credit when they were used dramatically by God.⁴⁵ Countless have succumbed to the temptation of self-elevation, yet no megalomaniac ever built an empire without willing subjects. The Bible reveals that it is the nature of the delivered to glorify the visible agents of their deliverance. How then, in view of the deceitfulness of our own hearts and the readiness of people to glorify visible saviors, are we to avoid the temptation that enters so mightily when God uses us in the healing of the afflicted? We could pray in secret without even the subjects of our prayers knowing that we pray for them. Yet God does want *His* name attached to the deliverance! The answer is to pray publicly, but in a group. When one prays as part of an elder team, though his prayers may be the ones that “touch the heart of God,” no one will ever know. God’s name will be the only one lifted up for praise. Since it is very difficult psychologically to hero-worship a group, the beneficiaries of any miraculous deliverance will be more inclined to honor the invisible God, than they will be to stand in awe of a diverse team of humans. Furthermore, if the elders truly constitute a team, then they will readily hold any of their number accountable who stray into self-exaltation.

Having thus acknowledged the instruction to the sick person to call for a plurality of elders, we must back up a step and recognize James’ scenario as the ideal, not as the absolute and only circumstance in which God will heal the sick. James says nothing of those with gifts of healing (1 Cor. 12.9) whom God presumably uses in a variety of settings. When Paul mentions these gifts, he gives no indication that they are limited to church elders. Nor are elders the only ones who can pray a prayer of faith. We must not even limit healing to situations in which the sick person takes the initiative to call, or in which there is anointing oil at hand. We must understand the importance of each of these elements in James’ scenario, but not limit the Holy Spirit to healing everyone under exactly the same conditions. On the contrary, James teaches us principles for every intercessor (not just for office-holders in the church: see James 5.16), and for varied venues, while in the process of identifying for us the key ingredients of the *ideal* healing environment.

The Prayer of Faith

The next of those ingredients, after responding to God’s invitation and calling for the elders, is prayer: not just “the prayer of faith” of verse 15, but probably a period of preliminary prayer envisioned implicitly in verse 14. It is an important distinction to make that James commands elders to pray over the sick person, but does not command them to pray the prayer of faith—he only promises what will happen when the prayer of faith is made. The passage clearly allows for preliminary prayer for discernment before the exercise of the prayer of faith. While the numerous records of healings in the early church rarely detail the actions of the healers, the earliest record available of a healing liturgy (before A.D. 800) describes serious preparation before the administering the prayer of faith. The liturgy called for exorcism of the sick person’s house first of all, then the anointing of the person on the throat, breast and back, with an extra dose at the area of the symptoms, and then called for general prayers of thanksgiving to be made by those present while the sick person was encouraged

to join in praying for his own recovery. While this liturgy doubtlessly involves unnecessary traditions of men, I offer it as evidence that Christians of an earlier time saw the validity of preparation for the prayer of faith. There is no evidence that elders in earlier centuries felt constrained to pray the prayer of faith immediately upon it being requested, but rather felt the liberty to seek God first.

In today's church where both leadership and congregation tend to be more transient, it behooves us all the more to seek God before trying to launch into a prayer of faith. Having recognized that "the prayer of faith" involves discernment of God's intent, it will normally require an in-depth interview with the subject requesting prayer, and then, unless the Lord grants immediate revelation, a potentially lengthy period of prayer, and possibly fasting, in order to discern the mind of the Lord.⁴⁶ God can certainly reveal His will instantly (and hopefully will in an emergency), but when He does not (and the nature of the illness permits), we must take the time to discern a basis for how we should pray. That process may involve serious counseling as well as repeated prayer sessions with the sick person, perhaps a tour of his home (if demonic activity is suspected), and possibly an extended time of prayer and fasting on the part of the elders. This preparation process should be explained thoroughly to the ailing person (again, illness permitting), making the distinction between general prayer and the prayer of faith so that they will not be filled with false expectations of miraculous healing in the event that God intends a deeper work in them or perhaps a healing by traditional means, or by a change of life-style or habit. Once the elders have done their job of discernment, they can explain their readiness to pray the prayer of faith and proceed.

Restoring The Whole Person

As we expand the practical scenario of James 5.13-18, we realize that though there is a focus upon physical illness, much more than physical healing is in view. James uses the generic verb *sodzo* (σώζω = save), rather than a more specific term like *therapeuo* (θεραπεύω = heal), when he describes the result of the prayer of faith in the sick person's life: literally, "...and the prayer of faith shall *save* the sick one." *Sodzo* was used to mean physical healing, as we see in the case of Lazarus (see Gk. of John 11.12), but we are more familiar with the term as connoting forgiveness, justification, sanctification and eternal life. While no one would suggest that the elders' "prayer of faith" *justifies* the sick person or gives him eternal life, we must recognize that the ministry which James had in view serves to deepen the fruit of Christ's salvation in the subjects life. God ministers to the whole person and intends to do that through those who minister in the church. As we seek God for discernment and minister in prayer and exhortation to a sick person, God deepens their sanctification. When God grants repentance, deliverance from oppression and physical healing in answer to our prayers, He is deepening the subjects experience of the abundant life inherent in Christ's salvation. Surely we would miss the spirit of James 5 if we, like televangelists, instantly healed the sick and sent them on their way with no ministry to their sickness of soul or relational dysfunctions. Let us remember the holistic approach of Jesus Christ (see John 5.14) and take time to minister to the whole person.

And not just to the sick person! James says in 5.16, "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another." There is no basis in James 5 to assume that when we come together to pray for a sick person, the sick person is the *only* one who should confess. No! Anyone who wants God to hear their prayers, pastors included, should take the opportunity to humble themselves before the corporate body and be cleansed of any conscious sins standing between them and the free flow of God's power in their lives. Remember the story of Job. Job was afflicted with illness, but God was dealing with more subjects than Job. God was working a plan of sanctification for Job, rebuke to Job's wife, instruction to Job's friends, humbling for arrogant Elihu, and a strategic victory over Satan *all through Job's illness!* Likewise, when a sick person calls for prayer by the elders of the church, God sometimes intends to deal with the entire congregation through that situation. I have seen this happen. God gives us all a deeper taste of His salvation when he raises up a sick person in response to the prayer of faith.

The Call to Persistence

The raising up doesn't always happen quickly though. We recently witnessed a spectacular divine healing in the Tacoma area that came in answer to the very pointed prayers of *several years*. We must be prepared to exercise persistence in the application of James 5, and this should not surprise us. We

find the principle of persistence throughout the biblical record of deeds of faith, even in the prayer of Elijah that James offers as an example. Elijah, though armed with God's explicit promise to send rain, was not content to make a perfunctory prayer. In the face of God's seeming inaction, he prayed, or at least sent his servant to look for God's answer, seven times. Yes it's true that Jesus and the apostles often healed people instantly, but as modern intercessors we must not make too many assumptions based on this fact. We have abundant contrasting testimonies in Scripture to teach us that God works through delays and continues to work in us as we persist in prayer, sometimes clarifying His will in a way that we would miss if we did not continue the seeking process.⁴⁷ In the words of R. Hama b. Hanina, (*Berakhot* 32b), "If a man sees that he prays and is not answered, he should pray again." When sick persons come to us for prayer, we should neither mislead them into always expecting instant results, nor should we teach them that God answers prayers by default, for he cannot be disparaged as a *silent god* like those of the heathen (Psalm 115.5; 135.16). Rather, we must help subjects for healing understand that God answers prayer on His own time table and intends for us to persist in seeking Him (Luke 18.1-8).

Some may yet argue that refusal to accept God's silence shows a lack of submission. However, this perspective inclines toward Muslim-like fatalism rather than toward an understanding of our God's ways. We modern Westerners need to get real and admit that our biggest problem with seeking God persistently is that "we just don't have time." On those rare occasions when God is wearied by our seeking, He is fully capable of telling us to shut up (Joshua 7.10; 2 Cor. 12.7-9). In the absence of God's command to desist, we should demonstrate our desire to understand God and His will more fully by continued seeking. God delights in such a pursuit. He is pleased when we seek His will in connection with some desire that is dear to our hearts, because it is then that He is able to deal with our hearts. On the other hand, it must grieve God when we mask lazy ignorance with a facade of pious submission. It's no wonder that God doesn't have time to heal us when we don't have time to listen for the soul-searching voice of His Spirit. If we stop praying because God's Spirit has told us to stop (through the scriptures or otherwise), fine and good, but woe to us if when we pray for a person's healing, we pray only briefly because of our lazy disinterest and then mouth platitudes of submission to God's will. A heart attitude of submission to God's will is essential, but the submission He calls us to is an active and creative submission that pursues a deeper knowledge of Him.

Anointing with Oil

The pursuit of a deeper knowledge of God and His ways provides the rationale for the anointing oil. We have already seen that the oil in James 5 is not set forth as the agent of healing. James explicitly states that it is the prayer of faith that will save the sick person; the anointing is a subordinate activity to the prayer.⁴⁸ Having understood this, we must teach subjects for prayer that the oil is neither sacramentally efficacious, nor intended as a natural medicine.⁴⁹ Rather it has a didactic role, much like that of the bread and wine in communion (for those of us who are non-sacramentarian in that regard also).

As a didactic symbol, the anointing oil is a vehicle for teaching, exhortation and comfort. Since anointing with oil has various connotations in scripture, we may wonder which of those connotations James intended. I'm inclined to incorporate them all. In the Old Testament three kinds of subjects were anointed: priests, kings and lepers. *Chrio* (Χρίω) was normally used for the first two, while in Leviticus 14.18, *natan* (נָתַן) and *epithemi* (ἐπιτίθημι, LXX) are used for the latter. Respectively to the three subjects for anointing, the Jewish Encyclopedia sees three different purposes in the ritual: consecration of the priests, inauguration of the king, and rehabilitation of the leper. The priest was removed from the realm of the profane by his anointing, the king was conferred with divine enabling and the leper was purified (atoned for).

With this body of meaning in view, I am inclined to remind the sick person as we anoint him that God heals us, not that we may better pursue profane pleasures, but rather that we may energetically pursue a priestly devotion to Him. As God heals us, the anointing also reminds us that, as the kings of old, we each have a commission from God, and our health is to be devoted to that commission. Finally, if the illness involves God's chastening for sin, the anointing reminds the sick person that, upon their repentance and confession, he is fully absolved by God and, like the cleansed leper of Israel, fully restored to the community of faith. As James promises, "if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him."

The Confession Of Sin And The Forgiving Of Offenses

Mark Buchanan insightfully describes people who doubt their forgiveness and despair of their confession, precisely because it was *not public*.⁵⁰ They confessed their sin privately to God, and were even encouraged to take God at His word and believe Him for forgiveness, but they missed that part of God's word that teaches confession to others when our sin has affected others (and it usually does). Consequently, like King David in Psalm 32.3-5, they have experienced what Buchanan calls "osteoporosis of the soul." They cannot humble themselves before another person, and so cannot feel God drawing near (see James 4.6,8). Oh, how we have struggled with this humbling discipline of public confession! Oh yes, we explain away the lack of public confession in our churches with good excuses: "That's Roman Catholic superstition," or "Public confession provides a platform for exhibitionists and more fuel for gossips." The inescapable facts are, however, that James commands it *and* there has always been a wise and circumspect way to "confess [our] sins to one another," without promoting scandal or falling into false sacerdotalism. Buchanan gives some wise guidelines, including: "Confession should be neither vague...nor overly graphic"; beware of "confessing a lot of others people's sin beside or instead of your own"; and "be wary of mistaking confession for repentance." It falls to each team of local church leadership to establish a protocol for public confession in their church, and specifically for confession in the context of a request for healing, and then to teach that protocol to their congregation. Let history spur us forward: all the great revivals and awakenings of the past have been marked—if not ignited—by the public confession of sin. If we desire vibrant spirituality in our congregations and deep restoration for those seeking healing, we must teach our people how to "confess your sins to one another."

With regard to the confession-healing connection, James undoubtedly draws on the principles of Psalm 66.18 and Proverbs 3.12. James encouraged the public confession of sin together with prayer for healing in 5.16, because he knew that unconfessed sin would hinder our prayers (and conversely that humbling ourselves would help them), and also because he knew that chastening for sin was sometimes the cause of the illness. Confession, with its implied repentance, would remove any personal barriers to God's answer, and if the illness were a chastening, it would remove any purpose for the illness to continue.

The prayer of faith passage in Mark 11 includes the principle of forgiving others for the same reasons. Some manuscripts add verse 26 to Mark 11.25, reinforcing the principle as in Matthew 6.15 with: "but if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions." Obviously, if we stand outside of God's forgiveness, we can hardly expect our prayers for miraculous healing to be answered, and again, considering the possibility of chastening, the illness may have come upon a person precisely because they were unwilling to forgive. These thoughts should guide us elders as we obey the instructions of James 5 and minister those who request the prayer of faith for healing.

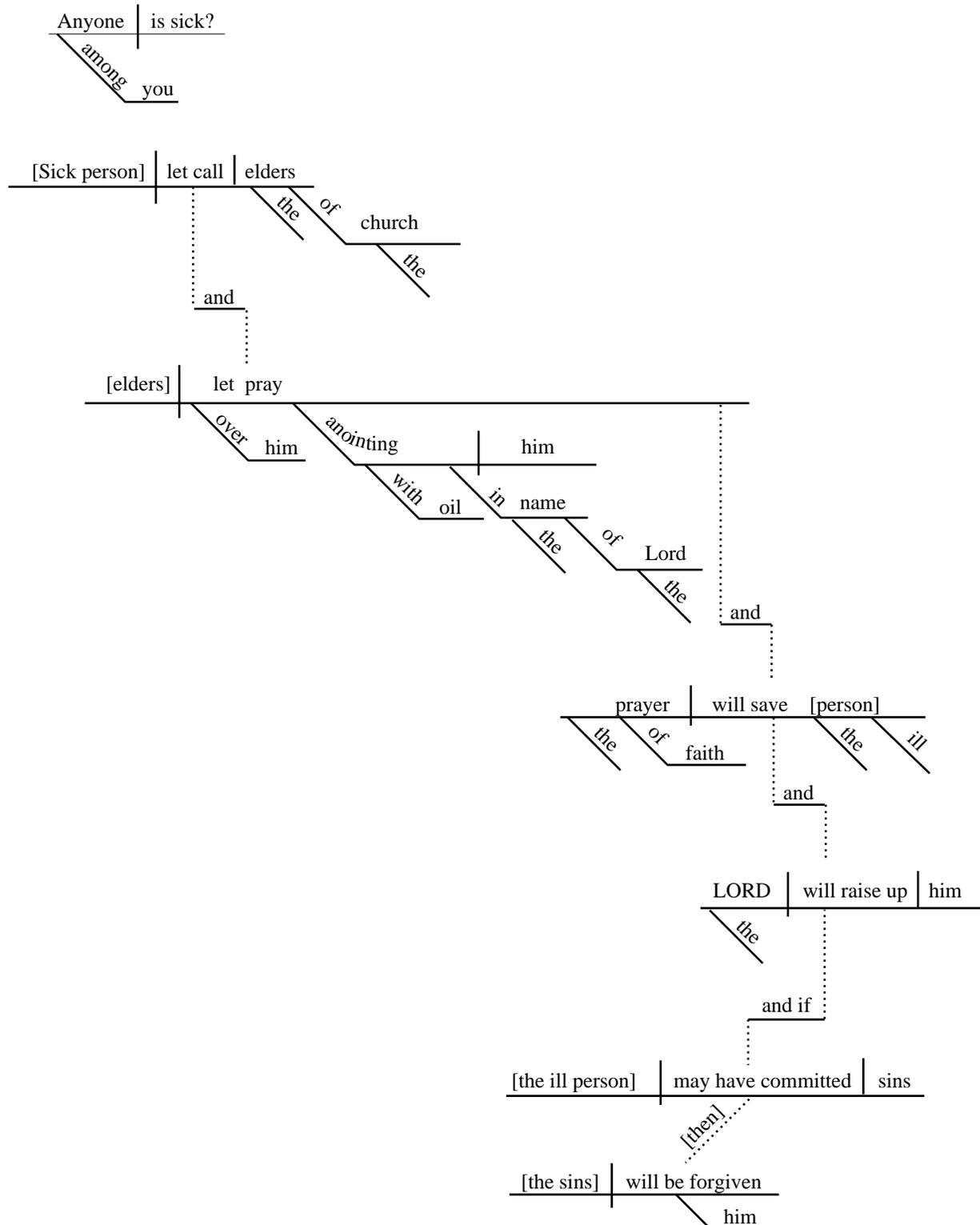
The Imperative of Obedience

Of course, as I've outlined above, there are alternative approaches to James healing passage. While I don't expect every reader to adopt my understanding of the prayer of faith, I do hope that this paper will spur each one to a more faithful obedience to James' instructions, however understood. We cannot in good conscience apply James' instructions on healing in a half-hearted manner. If the model I have presented is unacceptable, so is ignoring James 5.13-18. If we go to our graves insisting that there is insufficient data in the New Testament to warrant a confident application of the James 5 passage, I hope we will be prepared as we step into eternity to explain to our Master why we believed He gave us a responsibility without the necessary information to fulfill it. I believe that James 5.14 presents elders and pastors with a definite responsibility in the church, and that the teaching of Christ provides the keys we need to apply it. God grant us success as we seek Him more zealously than ever for a holistic healing ministry to the people of God. 🙏

Appendices

1. James 5.13-18 Diagrammed

An English Sentence Diagram Based On The Greek Text



2. Passages on Anointing with Oil, Listed by Term

Ἀλείφω

Gen. 31.13: anointing a pillar
Exodus 40.13: anointing Aaron to serve as priest! Morrish; Zondervan reads χρίσεις.
Num. 3.3: Aaron's anointed sons.
Ruth 3.3: Ruth washing.
2 Sam. 12.20: David washing.
2 Chron. 28.15: Medicinal balm.
Ezekiel 13.10-15: plastering a wall.
Dan. 10.3: cosmetic as in various passages.
Mat. 6.17
Mark 6.13; 16.1
Luke 7.38, 46
John 11.2; 12.3
James 5.14

Χρίσμα

1 John 2.20, 27

Χρίω

Exodus 29.2; Num. 6.15: cooking?
Exodus 29.7,29: anointing the priest.
Exodus 29.36: sanctifying the altar.
Leviticus: consistently of anointed priests.
Num. 7: consecrating furniture.
Duet. 28.40: general application.
Judges 9.8: anointing a king.
1,2 Sam; 1,2 Chron; Psalms.: consistently of consecrating kings.
Isaiah 25.7: cosmetic.
Isaiah 61.1: messianic.
Jer. 22.14: painting a house.
Ezek. 16.9: medicinal.
Dan. 9.24: consecrating the Holy of Holies.
Hosea. 8.10: kings.
Amos 6.6: cosmetic.
Luke 4.18
Acts 4.27
10.38
2 Cor. 1.21
Heb. 1.9

3. The Meaning of the Word Faith in Scripture

James actually mentions two kinds of faith. First, the faith of Hebrews 11.1: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” This is the unwavering faith that does not doubt of James 1. The second is “the concept of faith in accordance with the rabbinic assertion of *’emuna*, which means the assertion of monotheism! Faith...for James it is orthodox opinion.”⁵¹ This is the faith of James 2: “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”

Which concept of faith is in view in James 5.15? Is James talking about a prayer that does not doubt, or is he referring to a confession of orthodoxy? Is there a third alternative, such as simple trust in God’s character? No, we must have some basis to import a meaning of faith that is alien to our context. Apart from such a basis, we must interpret πίστις consistently with James’ other usage. Is then James’ “prayer of faith” a recitation of the *Shema*? Hardly! James’ whole discussion of “orthodox faith” is about a faith that *cannot* save (2.14: μὴ δύναται ἡ πίστις σῶσαι αὐτόν). In 5.15 he is talking about a faith that will save (ἡ εὐχὴ τῆς πίστεως σώσει τὸν κάμνοντα). We are left with James’ first concept of faith, the faith that does not doubt.

Still other meanings of the word faith are used by Paul. Paul emphasizes the exercise of faith in justification (Gal. 2.16), i.e. faith in the finished work of Christ. He does not ignore the part faith plays in living out the Great Commission after justification though. Consider his mention of the gift of faith in 1 Corinthians 12; his hope that as the Corinthians’ faith grows his ministry will expand (2 Cor. 10.15); his summation of the Christian life as “πίστις δι’ ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη” (“faith working through love,” Gal. 5.6). In the epistles to the Thessalonians, Paul speaks of a faith that produces action, but he seems to have basic Christian faith in mind, with the specific fruit of endurance in persecution and consistent righteous living (1 Thess. 1.3, 8; 3.7,8; 2 Thess. 1.3,4, 11; 2.13). This is in contrast to “mountain-moving” faith for a specific challenge in prayer, though we must recognize that the line is thin between a faith that supernaturally carries one through persecution and a faith that pulls some other miracle down from the hand of God. It strikes me that the primary difference is the clear revelation we have on the former. It takes little discernment to understand from the scriptures that God wills us to stand firm and not deny Christ nor give in to immorality in the face of persecution. We can pray in faith: “Lord, give me the power to stand firm even in the face of death or torture.” The quality of faith is the same as that for praying, “Lord heal this cripple.” The only difference is the further discernment required for the latter. In 1 Timothy 1.19 we find faith used to mean “the life of faith.” *Faith*, like *love*, should summarize the Christian life. In 2.7 find reference to “the true faith,” and so we have *faith* as a religious system, or set of religious beliefs (4.7; 5.8; 6.21; 2 Tim. 3.8). Then in 1 Timothy 4.12, faith is listed along with speech, life, love and purity as something for Timothy to “be an example in,” and in 6.11 is listed with righteousness, godliness, love, endurance and gentleness as something to “pursue” (cf. 2 Tim. 2.22). Likewise, in the chiasmic verse 4 of Philemon,⁵² Paul professes to have heard of Philemon’s faith, and since it is not news that Philemon was a believer, we quickly realize that he is talking about the *outworking* of Philemon’s faith. Again faith in Christ is seen as the impetus behind righteous and benevolent works.

In 1 Peter 1.5, we find the shield of faith (cf. Eph. 6.16), the same faith that is refined by trials (v.7), whose object is God (v.21). In 2 Peter, *faith* appears in the salutation as that gift of God that allows us to know Him.

In 1 John, faith is that belief in Christ that lifts a person above the trials and temptations of the age, “the victory that has overcome the world.” In Jude, we have again faith as the orthodoxy we must contend for. In Revelation, the emphasis is on faithfulness in tribulation.

Footnotes

- 1 Cf. Hebrews 12.13 and Revelation 2.3. Also Job 10.1; 17.2 in LXX.
- 2 For נִשְׁבַּח in LXX.
- 3 προσευχή προσήυξατο is a Hebraic way of saying “prayed earnestly.”
- 4 *United Bible Society’s Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed.
- 5 English Scripture quotes NASB unless otherwise noted.
- 6 *Today’s Handbook for Solving Bible Difficulties* (Bethany House, Minneapolis, 1990).
- 7 Kelsey, Morton T. *Healing and Christianity* (Harper & Row, New York, 1973), p.180.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- 9 For a thorough discussion of the Hebraic nature of James, see W. E. Oesterley, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), Introduction, pp. 391-413.
- 10 See sentence diagram in appendix.
- 11 O’Brien, David E. *Today’s Handbook for Solving Bible Difficulties* (Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, 1990), p. 337.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 341.
- 13 Kelsey, Morton T. *Healing and Christianity* (Harper & Row, New York, 1973), p. 209.
- 14 Blue, Ken; *Authority to Heal* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1987), p.24. Italics mine. In describing this ritual, Boettner adds the sad comment that “no matter how good the priest or his prayer, he still cannot assure the dying person of heaven. The best he can do is to get him into purgatory, there to suffer the pains of fire.” (Boettner, Lorain *Roman Catholicism* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, 1962), p. 191.)
- 15 Dispensationalism is a form of biblical interpretation derived from the teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800-82) of Dublin, Ireland, a leader of the Plymouth Brethren, and popularized by C. I. Scofield (1843-1921) in his *Scofield Reference Bible* (1902-1909 and revised in 1917). It emphasizes the idea that God *dispenses* redemption differently in different eras, and maintains a rigid discontinuity between the different dispensations.
- 16 Calvin, John; *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Presbyterian Board of Publication, Philadelphia, 1813), IV, xviii.
- 17 The power that lingered in Elisha’s bones implies that his fatal illness could not be blamed on any breach in his relationship with God (2 Kings 13.14,20-21). Neither do we suspect Paul of lack of faith for leaving “Trophimus sick in Miletus” (2 Timothy 4.20).
- 18 David E. O’Brien has well said, “But faith is like manna. We can’t collect it. God gives the faith we need when we need it.” *Today’s Handbook for Solving Bible Difficulties* (Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, 1990), p. 338.
- 19 Besides, James would have used the adjective πιστός and said “faithful prayer” plainly if that had been his intent.
- 20 Someone might argue that the meaning in James 1.6 is that one should not doubt *the guidance he receives from God* when he asks. However, verse 7 shows that the doubt comes before receiving the answer to the prayer, not after.
- 21 See W. E. Oesterley, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), Introduction, p. 423.
- 22 διακριθῆ is 1 aor. pas. subj. The meaning of *diakrino* depends on the voice. Active voice means differentiate, judge (and is sometimes translated discern); middle and passive take on the meaning “to doubt or dispute.” The root idea is *deliberation*. The principle here is that if we begin to judge ourselves, i.e., doubt, after having supposedly come to believe something, it shows that we have not truly come to a conviction about the evidence after all. When it comes to spiritual discernment, deliberation in the process of seeking God is good; deliberation after God has revealed His will is doubting.
- 23 λαμβάνετε: Majority Text.
- 24 The only difference being that Mark’s context uses the verb form of the word *faith* while James’ uses the noun.
- 25 The Greek fathers apparently preferred διστάζω, (e.g. 1 Clement 11.2).
- 26 James, writing before the evangelists, was probably the first to so use διακρίνω, probably to translate the Aramaic word פלג likely used by Christ (TDNT, pp. 948, 949).
- 27 Other occurrences where διακρίνομαι is translated as “doubting” are instructive in that they have to do with not doubting direction or promises from God (Acts 10.20; 11.12; Romans 4.20). In the case of Romans 14.23, the term is in pointed contrast to faith.
- 28 James seems well acquainted with the Sermon on the Mount. Compare, for example, James 5.12 with Matthew 5.33-37.
- 29 Both Christ’s teaching and James’ even bring in the issue of forgiveness, though from different perspectives. The concept of inward purification in preparation for petitioning the Lord is common to both passages.
- 30 The concept of ‘prayer without doubt’ has been often perverted by the idea that doubt can be erased by an energetic application of the will. “Just believe! Reject the doubts that Satan is throwing at you.” But wait—can I will myself into believing I will receive something just because I want that something? Is there no basis for faith other than my personal decision to believe a certain thing? Shall I just “name it and claim it”? What if God does not intend for me to have a new Cadillac? No amount of willing to believe or brainwashing of myself will produce James’ prayer of faith, for John teaches us that we must ask according to God’s will. Biblical faith always has a basis in God, whether in His word, an implication of His character, or a unique quickening of His Spirit. If we have no basis of faith from God, we cannot manufacture it for ourselves. I cannot pray the prayer

of faith if I have received no direction from God regarding the subject of that prayer.

31 W. Bingham Hunter, in *The God Who Hears* (IVP, Downers Grove, 1986), p. 12, fittingly defines prayer as “a means God uses to give us what he wants.”

32 We regularly apply general principles in the Bible to specific cases in life. How do we know it is not God’s will that Christians marry unbelievers, for example? The Bible doesn’t say explicitly, “Thou shalt not marry a non-Christian!” Scripture does however give us the general principle: “Do not be bound together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6.14). The context of this passage says nothing explicitly about marriage, and yet we discern from its general principle some specific applications to marriage, business, and religious affiliation.

33 I use the term “charismatic” in the biblical sense of “pertaining to the Holy Spirit’s working through spiritual gifts,” rather than with reference to the theological movement.

34 The burden of proof falls heavily upon those who insist that God speaks only through the Scriptures. They must not only justify limiting the concept of “God’s word” to the canonical text, but they must also deal with a Bible full of precedents for extra-canonical revelations. How did David know it was God’s will to save Keilah (1 Samuel 23.2) or how did Elijah know that God would finally send rain again in answer to his prayers (1 Kings 18)? Did Jesus have a chapter and verse that revealed the Father’s will to wither the fig tree? Where in the Bible did Agabus find that “a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world” (Acts 11.28). Was it a passage from the Septuagint that kept Paul from entering Bythnia or led him to go to Macedonia (Acts 16.6-10)? How did Paul know that the cripple in Lystra had the faith to be healed (Acts 14.8-10)? How were the Corinthian prophets supposed to know when to sit down (1 Corinthians 14.30)? To limit the Spirit now to the printed text is dispensational lunacy!

35 The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 1, Art. X.

36 Douglas, J. D. *The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Tradition*, p. 354, and George, Timothy “Dr. Luther’s Theology,” *Christian History*, Issue 34, p. 19.

37 For those who struggle with the idea that God still speaks directly to His people today, I recommend Jack Deere’s book, *Surprised By The Voice Of God* as a discussion starter.

38 Compare David’s importunate demands that God answer him, as in Psalm 4.1 and 13.3.

39 Isaiah 8. 19,20; 1 Thessalonians 5.21,22.

40 While I believe an essential ingredient of the prayer of faith is a definite answer from God, I do not put a deadline on it. Abraham prayed for 25 years after receiving the promise of a son before that son was given; some of our prayers of faith may not be answered in our life-time. I believe, though, that the prayer of faith is to be prayed persistently until fulfilled (Luke 18.1-8), or until God grants assurance in some other manner that the prayer has been heard and will be granted, making further prayer superfluous.

41 While the Bible uses the word *faith* with various related meanings (See Appendix 3), I would suggest that when the Scriptures are specifically speaking of an *act* of faith, whether an act of trusting Christ for salvation or the act of healing a sick person, they are speaking of a process with this general sequence.

42 Quote from NIV.

43 Though Kaaren has had repeated dental problems of a similar nature through the years, the length of time from her healing until the next incident, possibly with the same tooth, confirms that God truly took care of the problem at the time of the prayer. It was not a psychosomatic sense of feeling better for a short time, only to have the symptoms reappear after the euphoria of the prayer wore off. Since that time, we have sought the Lord again, once or twice regarding dental crowns for my dear wife. On those occasions, God has not granted healing, but rather financial provision. Her healing in 1974 seems to have had special purpose as a testimony to the liberal church we attended at the time, and certainly as an encouragement to our young faith. The provision of my needy friend’s car, related above, serves as another example of the prayer of faith: God had revealed His will, we had prayed with assurance, and God, for His own holy purposes, granted our specific request.

44 In America we have two big hurdles at this point: our love of privacy and our lack of house-to-house type shepherding (Acts 20.20).

45 See 2 Kings 5.15,16; Acts 14.13-15.

46 It is instructive to compare the synoptic accounts of the disciples query as to why they could not cast out a demon (Mat. 17.19; Mark 9.28). In Matthew Jesus replies, “Because you have so little faith...” In Mark, Jesus says, “This kind can come out only by prayer.” The synthesis of these two statements of our Lord implies that sufficient faith for the task is arrived at by prayer. I suggest that the prayer in view is prayer to discern God’s will, which discernment then becomes the basis for faith and action.

47 We even have the hint in Daniel 10 that persisting in prayer may aid the passage of God’s answer through barriers of demonic resistance.

48 See sentence diagram in Appendix 1.

49 While non-Catholic scholars reject the sacramental view of the anointing oil, many still incline toward the medicinal view. I wish they could see the weakness of the distinction between the two views. To name a specific medicine in such a context cannot help but encourage superstitions about it. If James had intended natural, medicinal therapy, he had language at his disposal to make that explicit.

Burdick gives his rationale for the medicinal view, but puts too much weight on his word study: “The overall emphasis of the paragraph is prayer. So the anointing is a secondary action. There are a number of reasons for understanding this application of oil as medicinal rather than sacramental. The word *aleipsantes* (‘anoint’) is not the usual word for sacramental or ritualistic anointing. James could have used the verb *chrio* if that had been what he had in mind...It

is evident, then, that James is prescribing prayer and medicine...In answer to the 'prayer offered in faith,' God uses the medicine to cure the malady." See Appendix 2.

50 Buchanan, Mark; *Your God Is Too Safe*, (Multnomah, Sisters, 2001), chapter sixteen, "The Good Confession."

51 Ladd, George E.; *Theology of the New Testament*, p.592

52 "I-give-thanks to my/God always, remembrance of-you making when I pray, (hearing of-your love (and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus) even unto all the saints,) so-that the fellowship of your/faith may-become/effective, in [the] knowledge of every good [thing] in us, for Christ's sake." -Philemon 4-6, my literal translation.