

# Body and soul

The subject of divine healing generates many ideas and questions. Circulated among many churches, “James” was written by Jesus’ brother who was known in the early church as “James the Just” and called the first “bishop” of the Jerusalem church.



**Michael Olmsted**

His letter appeals to early believers to faithfully live out their commitment to Christ (2:1). This particular text continues to be the foundation for a healing service and litany in churches today. Notice that James includes both suffering and joy at the core of church life: “If any of you are suffering, they should pray. If any of you are happy, they should sing” (5:13, CEB). Paul wrote the same thing in Romans 12:15. This combination should help us be open to each other in the family of faith by sharing burdens and encouraging one another.

James’ words challenge the predominant thinking of his day that illness was a sign of sin and God’s disfavor. Without any medical understanding, illness was often regarded as a way for nature to lessen the number of demands on society as a whole. So what seem to be simple words in this text actually replace pessimism with hope and point to the possibilities that the God of love and grace offers.

Even in our day there are debates about the relationship between sin and sickness that generate more guilt and confusion than enlightenment. James connects physical healing and forgiveness of sins, not as cause and effect, but as areas in which all must trust the grace of God.

Part of James’ understanding may come from the story about Jesus healing the man who was blind from birth (John 9:1-7). Jesus’ disciples questioned whether the blind man’s condition was caused by his parents’ sin or even the man’s sin when he was still in his mother’s womb! Jesus dismissed this damaging religious

idea by declaring that this was an opportunity to witness God at work. Hopefully, it helped everyone see beyond the damage that false thinking can do to us all! Jesus also specified that every day we live is our opportunity to serve God and bring hope to others (John 9:4). Perhaps James’ words reflect the ancient book of Job that punches all kinds of holes in our neat little arguments about God, sin and punishment.

James blesses us with the knowledge that God is the ultimate source of all healing, whether it is the product of medical procedures or a resolution beyond human understanding. The miracle of physical healing and forgiveness of sins comes from God (v. 15). Pay special attention to verse 16: “For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” This instruction is not a call to wholesale recounting of everyone’s problems and failures in public but an encouragement to be sensitive, understanding and compassionate as we pray for and help one another.

Two years ago I was asked to be the interim pastor of a church whose beloved pastor was dying of cancer. Pastor Sol was able to attend church most of the Sundays for the four months until his death.

We became friends very quickly and, after a couple of weeks, I asked his permission to invite the whole congregation to participate in the “laying on of hands” and prayer for Pastor Sol’s healing. It was a beautiful and moving experience as we prayed for healing, voiced our trust in our Father God and celebrated the gift of life that cannot be taken from us by the grave. We simply followed the words of James, and the result was both tears and joy.

Four months later we celebrated the life and home-going of our pastor and friend. We must remember that God’s ultimate gift of healing is experienced when we finally stand before his eternal throne in heaven.

We sometimes struggle with James’

## Formations

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Scripture: James 5:13-18

declaration that “the prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve” (v. 16). “Righteous” is not a designation of super-spirituality but the idea of a person who loves God and honors God in words and actions.

“Elijah was a person just like us” (v. 17) should remind us that for all the miracles in that prophet’s life, he was also a man who feared his enemies, ran away to hide in the wilderness and even complained to God that he was the only faithful man left on earth (1 Kings 17-19). Answers to prayer are not determined by our spiritual scorecard or standing in the religious community – we are in the hands of God Almighty, whose son revealed how deeply we are loved through the cross and resurrection.

We do not have all the answers. Why are some prayers answered while others are not? Do our prayers count for anything? Have James’ words become just another church ritual? We may easily speak the words “God’s will,” but faith is trusting God in every circumstance of life, not having a secret knowledge of all things. Our prayers count, not because we get our requested answer, but because we express our hope and security in the love of God no matter the immediate outcome.

Prayers are a part of ritual, but ritual is no substitute for the heart’s cry to God. If nothing else, prayer is our deepest expression of trust and love for God. When our hearts are filled with joy, we should celebrate in prayer. When our hearts are broken, we should call out to God whose very being embodies love and eternal hope. May we show the compassion and hope of God to our flawed and lost world.

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