

Prayer, Sickness and God's Will!

Friends last time in James we looked at v10-11 of chapter 5 'Remember the Prophets, Job, and Your Word'. We saw his two other examples of 'patience,' that 'longsuffering' under persecution. V10: "take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name." And as I said, in giving us these two examples, James puts paid to the notion that the Christian life is one of ease. The prophets were the Holy Spirit called mouthpieces of God, and yet many of them met violent ends! I hope you caught my mistake last time, because of course it was Peter who was crucified upside down not Paul. In Acts 7, (before his own martyrdom) Stephen boldly accused the Jewish ruling council of the persecution and death of God's prophets: "They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him," he said. Not some empty motivational speech, he hangs his words on the blood of the Saints! 2 Tim 3: 12: "In fact everyone who desires to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

But in Matthew 5:11-12 Jesus explained that if we follow in the footsteps of the prophets, we go in good company! And the writer of Hebrews details the many exploits of the heroes of God's Word. Many who paid the ultimate price for their faith saying: "The world was not worthy of them." And still today, 360 million Christians are heavily persecuted every year. With around 100,000 of them being put to death! In v11c, James speaks of Job's "perseverance" his remaining, in the face of unimaginable trials and loss. And he says in chapter 1:21: "The Lord he gave, and the Lord has taken away again. Blessed be the Name of the Lord." I made the point that throughout all of His saints' sufferings, God is at work, bringing about His purpose for all such things. Which is to grow our dependence upon Himself and ultimately carry us into glory!

In v12, James speaks of oaths and swearing by things. Which was the Jews basically breaking the third Commandment about "taking the Lord's Name in vain." They swore by things, believing that in doing so it relieved them from keeping their word, because they had not invoked God's Name. But James says no. Don't use frivolous oaths to make your point, that is blasphemy. Simply: "Let your Yes be yes, and you're No, no," because the true believer always speaks the truth. It's their bond, and a sign of their authenticity in Christ!

We now come to chapter 5:13-15a. 'Troubles, Prayer, Sickness and God's Will!' Friends, Blanchard explains that what we see in the closing verses of this letter to the persecuted scattered brethren of James, is the changing nature of the things of life. That rarely over short, (let alone long periods of time) do things really stay the same. Yes we do have that constant of God's love upon us, but His Providence and things that He is doing in us and through us, and what He is teaching us, like Job, is ever changing! Yes for the believer it is always good, Romans 8:28: "For we know that God works all things for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose."

But that goodness may well come through trial and hardship! And this section begins in v13 with: "Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray." The word for "trouble" here in Greek is "kakopatheia" and it means to suffer ill, be vexed, or dejected. Now this is most likely (as our context suggests) "trouble" at the hands of others for our faith. But I believe we can spread that net to include all kinds of ill, even those ills that we have brought upon ourselves. And as the commentator explains, it's how we deal with those things, James would have us know, that separates the true believer in Christ from the rest of the world!

But firstly let's deal with that suffering of which James is specifically speaking. Suffering ill for the sake of preaching the gospel. Being bold for our faith in Jesus. And for those of us who live in this modern western world, the tendency is for us to remain silent. To sidestep that conflict, that discomfort of being seen to be different. But we must be seen to be different, and how we take ownership of that difference is what really matters!

Jesus said: "Be in the world but not of the world." As we saw in Malachi, there is a line of distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian, and that line is Christ. So how we act and react in every situation matters! When I was first converted I didn't really get the idea of: "speak the truth in love." I was well up for an argument and I'm ashamed to say, that I quite enjoyed it. And I'm also ashamed to say, that I liked to prove myself to be right, regardless of the consequences. And also of what it was doing to my testimony. But of course as Christians who want to show all non-believers, be they family, friends, or indeed enemies who Jesus has exhorted us to love, we can't be that way!

So if we do find ourselves in conflict, or suffering in some way at the hands of others because of our faith, James gives us one remedy only: "He should pray." Yes: "We should pray," we don't get to take up arms against them. Now of course I'm not talking about being in times of war and not being able to bear arms, no. Or about defending ourselves and our loved ones if someone seeks to do us harm. But if someone does come against us and seeks to do ill to us in whatever way because of our faith, James says that we have one way to respond: "We should pray." No we don't get to take up arms, we don't get to be in violent arguments, and we don't get to bring vengeance upon them: "We pray."

Jesus put it this way in Matthew 5:39: "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Now friends I don't believe for a moment that Jesus is saying, if someone belts us on the right side of the face, we should get up and say, '*Hey, this side has no bruise, belt me again*', no. I believe He is saying, '*Be prepared to take a hit for your faith. Because to follow Me is going to cost you, perhaps even everything!*' In Luke 19:23, Jesus speaks of "Taking up ones cross daily." It's a constant thing you see. It's a constant struggle, that only finishes when life comes to an end. Or Jesus returns and takes us into glory!

But when these trials because of our faith do come we need to pray. And of course we have no greater example than that of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. As the world of the sin of His people, (from Adam to the last of his chosen ones rested upon Him) three times he cried out: "Father if it's possible take this cup from me." Why was Jesus being tortured and about to die? Well it was because of exactly what James is speaking of here in v13. He was suffering ill for the sake of His own gospel! In Acts 7:59 -60 in the midst of Stephen's own martyrdom we read: "While they were stoning him Steven prayed, 'Lord Jesus receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Yes: "Is anyone of you in trouble, (suffering ill for his faith and testimony) he should pray." We should Pray about the situation. We should Pray for all of the people involved, and we should Pray for ourselves.

We've seen it before in Ephesian 6:17-20: "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should." Yes "pray, pray, pray, pray and pray."

1 Peter 3:12 tells us: "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer." John Calvin said: 'There is no time when God does not invite us to himself.' So friends it is

not only when we are suffering ill for our faith, but in any kind of problem or trial: “we should pray. Perhaps there are difficulties within the family because a child has gone astray. “We should pray.” Maybe financial problems are causing conflicts within our homes and marriages: “We should pray.” Cherished friendships have been damaged due to silly misunderstandings: “We should pray.” The longing desire that we all have to see our unsaved family and friends come to Jesus: “We should pray.” Yes pray, pray, pray, pray and pray.

It couldn't be any clearer could it? And yet brothers and sisters as I have shared before, that if you are anything like me instead of pray, pray, pray, pray and pray. You run, run, run, run and run. Trying to do everything in your own strength, and it's only when all else fails it occurs to you to pray. Like the men on the ship with Jonah during that supernatural storm sent from God In chapter one! Throwing everything overboard, doing all that they could think of to save themselves, even calling on their false gods. Until finally they cried out to the God of heaven, and through Jonas confession and sacrifice, he saved them.

And as in that beautiful verse in Malachi 3:16: “Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other and he listened and heard.” Yes: “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayers.” James continues in 13b: “Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.” It's the word “euthemei” and it means to be cheerful or in good spirits: “Let him sing songs of praise.” Literally it was to sing a Psalm of praise to God. Just as David and others did when they wrote the psalms. Many of them are their expressions of bursting out in thanks to God. Be it simply for His wonderful Creation. Or His daily blessing of life. Or for the provision of our most basic of daily needs. Maybe for His many promises of mercy and His provision in the eyes of the storms of life, fulfilled in Jesus! Or perhaps the promise of the heavenly glory that awaits us. The psalms are full of this kind of stuff. It is simply men responding to God's goodness to them!

I'm often up when the sun first bursts forth over the horizon, and the verse that often comes to mind as those first rays of light come: “The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.” And often I can't help but burst out with, ‘praise you O Lord for your goodness to me’. That's simply what James is talking about. Let your hearts burst forth in praise and adoration to God. It might literally be by singing a hymn that comes to mind, all the better. I know Alan often writes his prayers down. What a great thing. Perhaps those who do this should also record their praises to God. Yes that's what the Psalms are. Of course they are inspired by God, but that is what they are. And friends Blanchard explains, that when we do these things in humility, we are simply confessing that You O Lord, hold all things including we ourselves in Your Hands!

V13: “Is anyone troubled? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing psalms of praise.” v14-15a: “If any one of you is sick, he should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.”

Brothers and sisters, this is one of those parts of scripture that has been misconstrued, misused and abused by so many with their own evil agendas, and particularly so over the past 40 to 50 years. But also simply misunderstood by genuine believers, as to how those things ring true today for all of us who want to abide by all of God's Word. Since the time of the Reformers some 500 odd years ago, there have been many reasonable views. According to Blanchard, Matthew Henry, Matthew Poole and John Calvin, (some of the greatest Bible commentators of all time) hold, that since the time of the miraculous signs and wonders that were used by God to herald in the gospel age through the apostles has ended. Yes that time of miracles having come to an end. While of course never wanting to limit what God can do or what He will do, but yes since that time of Apostolic signs and wonders

has finished, then so too has this specific instruction about healing also finished! There are those that use these verses and others for specific healing ministries. That this is in effect James' prescription for healing illness and disease.

Beloved, the problem that I have with such thinking, is why then isn't everyone who goes through this process healed? Paul himself who wrote about a third of the New Testament, asked God on three separate occasions to take what he called his "thorn in the flesh" away. Some say it was a problem with his eyes, others speculate about other ailments. Still others suggest that this was a spiritual thorn. Some kind of sin that he was wrestling with. But whatever it was, God's answer to him was basically, enough is enough Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you." So if this is the prescription which James speaks of, why didn't Paul use it? There are those that say that people who go through this process and yet die, have indeed ultimately been healed.

When Darlene was at school, a young guy that she knew was in a car accident and the whole school was praying that God would heal him. But in the end he died. And so many people asked the question, why didn't God heal him? Until one of the teachers actually said, 'Well God did heal him. God answered our prayers. He is with the Lord.' Now of course I say Amen to all of that.

But is that what the text is saying? I myself have placed my hands on people with other church members and elders praying for those who were sick and some have been healed such as Allison and Alan, but others haven't. It wasn't what we would refer to as miraculous. But they were healed. As you all know, I myself have had some amazing healings. But who does these healings? God has given the doctors the skills and has revealed the knowledge to them over thousands of years. He gives the medical breakthroughs and He provides the medicines also.

So who is the healer? Those other people and things are the instruments, but who is the healer? Exodus 15:26 says: "For I Am the Lord who heals you." In Psalm 103:1-3 we read: "Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases." Yes: "who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases." In Act 9:34 we read: "Aeneas, Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat". Immediately I Aeneas got up."

So yes it is God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who is the great Physician that heals. Though He uses many vessels and avenues. So what is this text saying? Well were we to take this literally to the enth degree, think about it, basically we would be saying that Christians would never have to die. And as some do indeed claim, Christians need never get sick, and even if they do, (if they have enough faith) they can apply James' prescription and all will be well. But Beloved, pain and suffering and tears will only be wiped away forever in glory!

Blanchard quotes a man named A.P Waterson who wrote: 'great care must be exercised in avoiding the magical in search for the miraculous.' There is nothing mystical about anything in this process. Nothing magical about the oil. There is no such thing as holy water as in Roman Catholicism. Swinging balls of smoke and twirling rosary beads in our fingers will do us no good! This process and prescription the Commentator explains really is a reminder for both the sick person and the elder. Those in great physical need must remember that they are not alone, and call for the help of prayer. And the elder, or Shepherd of the flock, must remember that their ministry is not to be done from a distance, it's hands on. Yes we should and do pray for people when they are not in the room, but the work of the Shepherd is to be up close and personal!

And yet having explained all of that, I again asked the question, What do these words mean? Well I can tell you that I really struggled with this, even with the help of the many fine men that I consulted.

And among them all, it was only John Blanchard who was I guess bold enough, to give a firm explanation of these perplexing words. And he explains that the key is found in the two phrases: "In the name of the Lord" and: "the prayer offered in faith." You see in biblical times a person's name didn't only reveal who they were, but also what they were. The word "name" "onoma" in Greek is made up of two words. "nous" meaning mind and "ginosko" meaning to know. To use the Commentators words, it was a revelation of the person`s mind, character and personality. That's what a name signified. And when we apply those things to God's Name, we must also speak of His presence in all things, His authority and of course His Will!

And James has already given us an example of this phrase and how it should be applied in v10 when using the example of the prophets: "Brothers as an example of patience in the face of suffering take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." Friends the prophets revealed the mind of God for His people and the broader world. His Plan, His Purpose and His Will. And the test of the true prophet, was that which he spoke in God's Name, must come to pass. Otherwise they were a false prophet, indeed they spoke from demons. Of course of which there are a myriad today. We judge them by their words, their false words to see who they truly are! So then to "anoint a person with oil in the name of the Lord" was to in effect prepare that person for the Will of God to be made known and done in their life. Or to use Jesus Own Words: "Not my will but yours be done."

We have the very same sentiment in chapter 4, when speaking to those vain Jewish business owners who believed they had their future in their own hands, and could make plans for even years to come. Ch.4:15: "Instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live." So the elders that pray, and the person to be prayed for, have completely committed themselves in faith, to the Mind and Will of God by invoking "the Name of the Lord. And if God wills, that person will be healed. Those "prayers offered in faith, will make the sick person well." And look at the key: "The Lord will raise him up."

Friends it's the only thing that makes any sense. The elders have come to the sick person's place, and from there in the doctor's surgery so to speak, they will together call upon the Great Physician, God. And if He choose, He will "raise that person up" from their illness.

So how do we tie this together today? Well if we are in any kind of trouble, (particularly so if it's because of our gospel stand and our faith) "we should pray." If we "are in good spirits" due to the wonder and blessing of God, "we should praise Him and pray And if we are sick physically, or vexed or dejected emotionally, mentally, or spiritually, let us gather together "to pray" for that person, and commit them and the situation to the Mind and Will of God. And if He wills, healing will indeed come!

Let's pray!