

## **How Weakness in Your Body or Spirit Can Magnify Christ in His Body and Spirit**

*Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on March 28, 2010*

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James 5:14–16 (NASB95) <sup>14</sup> *Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;* <sup>15</sup> *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.* <sup>16</sup> *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.*

Through the centuries, many Bible readers and traditions have seen these verses in many different ways, so let me start acknowledging its controversial interpretations by Catholics and cultists, as well as confusion/questions within charismatic and conservative Christians

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH (RCC) VIEW – this passage supports confessional booth (v. 16) where someone goes to the church and tells a priest of his sins so he can be told what penance to do for forgiveness (“sacrament” of auricular confession). Luther’s reply was that’s a strange name for a priest in v. 16: “his name is *one another*”?!)

But in NT teaching, Jesus is the only Mediator and all believers are priests with direct access to God (1 Pet. 2:19). The church is not the replacement of Israel with its priesthood and ceremonies and rituals (RCC is a full replacement / continuation theology but good biblical theology recognizes Christ’s fulfillment of all the shadows, symbols, ceremonies, so we don’t continue Judaistic religion ritual of OC). Also this text is not at all about going to church to climb into a booth one-on-one with a single priest who can’t see you, it’s someone calling for Elders to come see him/her for prayer (v. 14).

The Council of Trent cited James 5:14 for the RCC sacrament called “extreme unction,” which is a sort of last rites preparing someone’s soul for dying and afterlife. One source says that to apply v. 14, it “must be olive oil mixed with balsam, consecrated by a bishop, who must nine times bow the knee, saying thrice ‘Ave, sanctumoleum’ (Hail, holy oil), and thrice ‘Ave Sanctum chrisma’ (Hail, holy chris), and thrice more, ‘Ave, sanctum Balsamum’ (Hail, holy balsam). The members anointed are the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and for the extremities, the reins and feet: in women, the navel. The design thereof is, the expulsion of the relics of sin and to equip the soul for its conflicts with the powers of evil in the moment of death.” Arthur Pink says “one has but to mention these things to reveal their absurdity.”<sup>1</sup>

v. 14 isn’t calling for a priest to help you prepare to die, it’s calling for Elders to pray with you to *help you live* healthy spiritually!

FAITH-HEALER VIEW – James 5:14 is also a primary proof-text for some word-faith healers, including one in particular whose events I have visited in person and what takes place is nothing like this text. After an unbelievable amount of repetitive music and trance-like environment, in my opinion, many become suggestible and susceptible to almost anything, and people line up for supposed healings.

It's a 'highly orchestrated performance choreographed so that [this "faith-healer"] emerges from a covered tunnel dressed in gleaming white just as the massive choir reaches the crescendo of "How Great Thou Art." During the course of the show, [he] will speak to a select few on stage who claim to have been healed of various maladies ... [he] rarely if ever lays hands on those who are in need of healing. Only those claiming to have *been* healed are allowed on stage ... [*the tragedy is I have personally heard of some and even talked to some wheelchair-bound people who were turned away from the stage, some from the faith, as they were told implicitly or explicitly their lack of healing is due to the lack of their faith*] ...

This TV minister's book says God 'promises to heal all – every one, any, any whatsoever, anything – all our diseases! That means not even a headache, sinus problem, not even a toothache – nothing! No sickness should come your way. God heals all your diseases ... If Jesus should tarry, God's Word says that you will not die with some sickness ...'<sup>2</sup>

But that so-called healer will not be able to heal himself when God determines what day he will die and from what sickness. All his healing heroes from the past died of something they weren't healed of, and James 5:14-15 is not a guarantee that all sickness is healed if the person has enough faith, and that faithful Christians can hold off death by disease forever if they keep applying this passage.

This text is talking about the faith and prayer *of the leaders* not the struggling Christian as the source of the healing. Even if it was saying "lack of healing=lack of faith," it's not faith *of the one who has asked for prayer*, it's the praying leaders' faith! But v. 14-15 isn't really even about that or any theatrical healing crusade with a false teacher who claims *he* has the "anointing;" this text is about one at home who calls for spiritual shepherds of his local church to come pray, anoint, shepherd him as a struggling sheep.

But what about Christians who do apply this passage literally as they understand it, doing exactly what we read in our English text, and the physically ill person isn't healed? Should we conclude that faith has failed? It sounds like an absolute promise of God – has God failed? Or maybe have *we failed to interpret the verse rightly?*

From a pastoral and practical standpoint, it's critical we get it right. It's not just in cultic groups, some in Christian circles have been confused on the relationship between faith and medicine and have believed it's more spiritual just to believe and have faith that God will heal you from your disease or serious condition and not seek help from doctors or not use medicine (just follow James 5)? Some think oil in v. 14 *does speak of medicine* (ex: Samaritan, Lk 10:34). Jesus Himself affirmed, "the sick need a physician." Paul told Timothy in inspired Scripture to take care of himself medically: 1 Tim. 5:23 (NIV) *Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses* [or infirmities]

Our body is the temple of Holy Spirit, so *use any means God may heal by*. One challenge to the traditional understanding of this as a pattern or prescription for *miraculous* healing is that the giants of the faith who have seen God answer prayers of faith again and again in other areas of life have not seen consistent physical healing when they seek to apply this (Amy Carmichael, George Muller, etc.).

But not only should church history cause us to question whether taking this text as a promise for physical healing is correct, other *biblical characters and passages* also challenge that interpretation.

JOB (v. 11) – man with most faith on earth was ill *by God's will*.

PAUL – In 2 Cor. 12, this man who perhaps had the greatest healing power of anyone besides Jesus in history, and perhaps the greatest faith of anyone in the NT, he has some physical disease or weakness or illness (scholars debate what exactly his problem was) that he prayed repeatedly for healing but God never took it away.

EPAPHRODITUS – with Paul some time and sick for some time and almost died, but God was gracious in His case (Phil. 2:25-27), though many other saints surrounded by prayers died of illnesses.

TROPHIMUS – Paul says he left him sick at Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20)

TIMOTHY – not healed even by Apostle Paul either (1 Tim 5:23)

Clearly it's not God's will for His people to never be sick or infirm or to have a disease, in fact Jesus taught that it not only *can be* God's will, but *is intended by God to bring glory through it* (Jn 9). Jesus Himself, the book of Hebrews tells us, had to be made like His brethren in every way that is fully human (2:17-18), including our suffering and *infirmities* (4:15, same Greek word as Jas. 5:14). Certainly Jesus wasn't lacking in faith, and most certainly we can't conclude it's always God's will we be free of sickness or suffering.

So what do we do when we come to a passage like James 5? On surface reading seems an absolute promise of healing if followed?

Some have argued based on the theology that this passage shouldn't be practiced by the church today, because it was only for the *dispensation* (that means *age*) of miracles, through the apostles while the church was being founded. But now there is a *cessation* (ceasing) of the miracles of that time period. There were unique powers God gave the original Apostles and Paul and those closest to them, to be sure, such as healing any and all sickness and disease, like total paralysis on command, even raising the dead, or being able to heal by mere touch, or by a cloth that had touched the apostle, or even the shadow of the apostle falling on someone. No human since has duplicated such a gift.

That's a whole other subject, though, because v. 14 doesn't say to call for an apostle or one with the "gift of healing" to heal like we read Jesus and His apostles did in the gospels or early part of Acts. And even when they were around, Paul and friends didn't always heal all through all their life, it wasn't the usual norm in churches. In most of biblical history most saints weren't miraculously healed.

We do know God can and does heal today, as some of you in this room have experienced maybe yourself or someone close to you, God's healing in response to prayer, which I don't doubt.

I suspect in most if not all of those healings the sick may not have called elders to actually come to their sickbed and anoint with actual oil, and I can also tell you of times where others did ask for that and it was followed in faith and healing didn't take place. I've heard of times where the same men followed the same process with the same prayer and faith in their hearts for two different sick people. One was healed, the other not.

Again I ask, should we conclude there was a problem with prayer or faith when we don't see physical healing? Or maybe is there a problem with how our minds interpret and understand this text, and maybe other Scriptures about prayer and God's sovereign will?

This verse says "*call for the elders*," which is the normal NT term in epistles for church leaders (not the term for "healers"), and they don't come and pronounce or produce a healing, they are to come as shepherds to pray over, and for, and with their hurting sheep.

This verse doesn't say anything about a human with a *gift of healing*, it is about praying to *the God of healing* (and there's more than one type and timing of healing, as we'll consider later). If you are only thinking in terms of miracles, or the meaning of some of our English terms in the text, or that there is some magical formula or ritual going on here (like rubbing a bottle of oil, and the "genie of healing" responds to your wish), you'll get off-track.

The epistles are written to the churches, and are Christ's final and sufficient revelation to His people until He comes again, as to what we need for life and godliness today. We do need to understand the original context and apply Bible study principles (hermeneutics), then by careful observation and interpretation, we can determine proper application with God's help for God's people today. I don't want to impose a theological system on a text to explain it away. I want to put traditions and systems aside as much as possible and let God speak and challenge and change my thinking where needed

### **What type of sickness and healing is this speaking of?**

You can use a Strong's Concordance to note 2 different Grk words translated "sick" in most Bibles in v. 14-15. <sup>15</sup> *and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick ...*

Young's Literal Translation has "*the distressed one*" (rather than *sick*)

The word "restore" can mean "save," often spiritual not physical.

In the Greek dictionaries, the word translated "sick" in v. 15 means

- "weariness of mind" (Zodhiates, *WSDNT*)
- *Greek-English Lexicon of NT*: ... literally 'to become tired in spirit' ... to gradually lose one's motivation to accomplish some goal—'to become discouraged, to become tired of ... or give up' (LN 25.291)
- *be weary, fatigued* ... weariness of the soul ... wandering soul ... tired or weary of the continued succession of the wars ... those who are tired of living (BAGD, p. 402)
- Philo used this Greek word of God's 'applying ... balm to **the wounds of the soul**' (*Migr. Abr.* 124)

- In the *Apostolic Greek Fathers* we find this word used of the needy/afflicted: **to exhort those who are sick at soul**, not to cast away those that have stumbled from the faith, but ... **to put courage into them**' (Shepherd Herm. 8:10)
- Other ancients used this word of how one feels 'on account of bad news ... besieged people whose spirits have flagged badly [who need to] take fresh courage (*TLNT*, 2:251–253)

The point of all this is to say the original language words of verse 15 usually or especially emphasize the spiritual or emotional part of man, rather than his physical or medical sicknesses or illnesses. The verbs *restore/save* and *raise up* usually have a spiritual aspect, though they can be applied to the physical body, the context as you keep reading v. 15-16 speaks of sin and the blessing of forgiveness

Only other NT use of Grk word "sick" is a few pages back. Turn to Heb. 12 (Heb. 11-13 has much connection with James 5:10-16):

Hebrews 12 (NASB95) <sup>3</sup> *For consider Him who has **endured** such hostility by sinners against Himself, **so that you will not grow weary** [same word translated "sick" in James 5:15] **and lose heart***

It's not physical sickness but spiritual weariness leading to losing heart, becoming despondent, discouraged, distressed or depressed. This is the only other place the NT word occurs, here clearly not physical sickness but used of a spiritual or emotional weariness. Just as a race wearies the outer man (v.1) our inner man gets weary

End of v. 5 says don't ... **faint when you are reproved by Him** ...

The context of this chapter and following verses is clearly spiritual discipline and spiritual faintness of heart, feebleness, despondency.

<sup>12</sup> ***Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed***

[same word for "heal" in Jas 5:16, here spiritual/emotional;

1 Pet. 2:4 says by Christ's wounds we're healed spiritually]

***13:7 Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith [elders] <sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. <sup>9</sup> Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for **it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods** ...***

... <sup>17</sup> ***Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they [elders] keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this **with joy and not with grief***** [notice the spiritual / emotional terms] ... <sup>20</sup> ***Now the God of peace, who **brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep** through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, <sup>21</sup> **equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever.*****

That's ultimately why God allows discipline or discouragement, or disability (as John 9:3 says): to manifest God's work and magnify God's glory, which can be done in many ways besides healing. We have a big God who has manifold ways to magnify Jesus Christ.

Any difficulty (emotional or spiritual or physical) is part of God's Master Plan, as Heb. 13:21 says "*to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight,*" to glorify and magnify Jesus Christ

The purpose of leaders / teachers / Elders / shepherds: represent the Great Shepherd Jesus, make visible and make bigger His glory by His heart-strengthening grace to His faint, feeble and weak sheep!

That's why I gave this message this title: How Weakness in Your Body or Spirit Can Magnify Christ in His Body and Spirit

The "body of Christ" is His church (context where we help each other), and the "Spirit of Christ" is another name for the Holy Spirit of God (both Paul and Peter use "Spirit of Christ"). James tells us how individuals who are weak in body or spirit (especially weariness *of spirit*, the term seems to mean) can call upon others in the body of Christ, especially the Elders as spiritual shepherds of a local body to strengthen, support, and restore to spiritual health, and the result: Christ is magnified and His body is made healthier.

If sin is involved (v. 15b) and confessed (v. 16), more spiritual healing can occur, and spiritually mature elders can help more (like Galatians 6:1 says "*you who are spiritual restore such a one ...*"). If James was just giving advice to the physically sick about purely physical issues, he could just simply say "call for a doctor." But it makes sense to call for spiritual leaders if there is a spiritual issue.

If *physical healing by prayer* is all the text is about, then in v. 17-18 when he gives an illustration, there were many examples of healing from the OT he could have drawn from. If he wanted to illustrate someone sick about to die who was healed and his life was extended many years, Hezekiah is a prime example. Naaman was healed by Elisha in conjunction with the Jordan river, but by was God's power not the actual fluid (as actual oil doesn't heal).

If James was talking about bodily healing, he could have used one of the greatest bodily healings in all the OT, the healing of the widow's son in the chapter **Elijah** is introduced who died of sickness (1 Kings 17, a story which also involves oil continuously pouring miraculously, then a healing). But instead James describes how Elijah's prayers brought drought for 3 ½ years then rain again.

That illustration is *not* the one from Elijah's life illustrating how God heals miraculously by prayer, but it is a perfect illustration if James is talking about someone spiritually dry, barren, weary, parched, scorched, and in need of refreshment from heaven above. I believe that's the type of restoring and rejuvenating in James 5:15.

In that context of 1 Kings 18, it says Elijah prayed with his head down, bent over, face between his knees, before the raincloud came on the 7<sup>th</sup> time, and then God gave the weary prophet supernatural strength to be able to outrun Ahab's chariot. That's a perfect illustration if we translate James 5:15 the way the same word is translated in Hebrews 12 in the context of a race, "the one *who has grown weary or lost heart* [spiritually] will be restored..."

Supernatural strength following prayer for a weary believer is what is in the context of James 5:17-18 for Elijah's prayer and the rain that came (1 Kings 18). Then just a couple verses later in that same OT story, Elijah becomes distressed, if not depressed, in persecution, and wants to give up on life and die as he prays (1 Kings 19:3). He feels like he's all alone. Again God mercifully strengthens him supernaturally for his journey and God tells him he is not alone, there are 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Then Elijah is strengthened again by God to endure (like James 5:10-11 teaches of prophets under persecution, cf. v. 1-6).

That fits perfectly with understanding James 5 as referring to how prayer can refresh and restore spiritually dry, distressed, depressed, oppressed, repressed, weary warriors hitting emotional low points. Believers sick or weak in spirit need spiritual healing / restoration.

There's a different word translated "sick" in v. 14 I also looked in over a dozen reference works, articles, and read dozens more pages and traced out how it's used in NT, LXX, Greek literature, etc. Its literal meaning is "without strength" and its primary meaning is consistently listed as "weakness ... feebleness ... powerless," etc.

English Bibles didn't always translate it "sick" here. Tyndale NT of 1525 (first English translation from Greek): *Yf eny be **defeated** amonge you let him call for the elders of the congregacion ...*

Later English translations (debatably influenced by the Latin translation which has the word "infirmity") used the word "*deseased*" (Miles Coverdale 1535 and Bishop's Bible of 1568) or "*sicke*" (Geneva Bible 1587, KJV 1611 and later). This is not the Grk word for disease, but can mean discouraged, defeated. It *can* speak of weakness related to illness, even very seriously ill.

In John 11:3-4, the sisters of Lazarus send word to Jesus: "*Lord, behold, he whom You love is **sick.***"<sup>4</sup> *But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but **for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it.**"*

That is one way Jesus is glorified: healing bodily weakness or illness, even to the point of a lifeless corpse being raised to life. But it's not the only way Jesus can be glorified. And I think James 5:14 is addressing more particularly or primarily how Jesus can be, and is, glorified in everyday people, in every church (or should be). It's not by extraordinary miracles but by the ordinary means of prayer and pastoral and practical shepherding of spiritually weak sheep (discouraged, depressed?) so they won't go astray (v. 19-20).

In the NT epistles, the usual way the Grk from v. 14 is used is not of physical sickness, but spiritual weakness (weak in faith, weak in conscience, weak in general, etc.).

James could've used other Grk words if we wanted to speak of those with diseases or illnesses, but he uses this word that the epistles almost always translate "weak."

2 Corinthians 11 is a classic example of how the NT letters use the term. Notice he begins talking about all his persecutions and physical hardships (also the context of James 5:1-11) and watch how he moves from those to his "weakness" (same Grk word as James 5:14, with mental / emotional / spiritual nuance).

2 Corinthians 11 (NASB95) <sup>23</sup> *Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.* <sup>24</sup> *Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.* <sup>25</sup> *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.* <sup>26</sup> *I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;* <sup>27</sup> *I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.* <sup>28</sup> ***Apart from such external things, [note the contrast now of external physical body] there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.*** <sup>29</sup> ***Who is weak without my being weak? [same word as Jas 5:14] Who is led into sin without my intense concern? [notice "weak" is associated with mental or emotional pressure or intense concern]***

**12:7b ... for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!** <sup>8</sup> *Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.* <sup>9</sup> *And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for **power is perfected in weakness.**" Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.* <sup>10</sup> *Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong ...*

I am suggesting that the better way to translate or understand v. 15 is to see spiritual restoration of spiritual weakness by the intercessory prayers of those who are spiritually strong. I don't think it's prescribing or promising physical healing in this life.

When v. 15 says "... and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him," it's no stretch to see how spiritually that can refer to the lifting up of the downcast soul as we read in the psalms how God raises us up emotionally as we pray. And the end of the verse moves beyond restoration of our spiritual or emotional state, to forgiveness of sins to restore the state of our relationship with God, which is clearly most important.

Now I know understanding v. 14 as spiritual weakness is different than most Bible versions through the years, and how most of you have understood this passage, and how most commentators explain it to this day, but physical sickness to me is at best questionable in regards to a prayer promise in this passage; it seems more spiritual.

But what does the 'anointing with oil' mean in v. 14? Next time ...

Now practically, if you're struggling physically with illness or any significant issue that would like me or more than one of us elders to pray for you or with you, ask any of us. And of course we will do so, and have done so (w/ oil if asked or laying on of hands, in a home or hospital, or if you ladies would prefer a godly lady to visit and pray, we are here to shepherd or serve in any way). I just don't believe this passage is best taken as a physical healing promise. But that doesn't mean I won't pray for healing, just know I'll also pray for you spiritually for strengthening or restoring, and above all, I will pray in God's will for Christ to be glorified or magnified.

John 14:13 *“Whatever you ask **in My name**, that will I do, so that **the Father may be glorified in the Son.**”*<sup>14</sup> *“If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.*

1 John 5:14<sup>14</sup> *This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, **if we ask anything according to His will**, He hears us.*<sup>15</sup> *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.*

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Divine Healing: Is it Scriptural?* Appendix on James 5:14-16.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/thesis.pdf>, pages 51-53 (citing Benny Hinn, *Rise and Be Healed*, p. 32, 25).