

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

Let's Pray James 5:14-18 Part Five

We have begun to examine James 5:13-18. I have broken this passage into two major parts. The first part I have entitled, "Prayers that we pray in response to what is happening in our lives." The second part of this passage I entitled "Prayers that others pray in response to what is happening in each other's lives." This of course is dealing with intercessory prayer.

We began this study by looking at the prayer of the elders for the sick (James 5:14-15). Let us read this passage **James 5:14-15, (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.**" Again, I would like to remind you that this passage of Scripture is easily the most controversial in the whole epistle of James. There are many very excellent Bible scholars who disagree about the interpretation of this passage. My purpose has not been to give you all the possible interpretations. My purpose is to share with you what I believe is the best interpretation of this passage and why I believe it. Your responsibility is to examine what I say and see if it is true.

What have we discovered in this examination? We have discovered that a seriously ill person was expected to call for the elders. We have discovered that the elders who were called were expected to pray over the sick individual, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. We have discovered that the expectation of the sick individual as well as the expectation of the elders was that they would in fact be healed. We also discovered that this should not have been surprising.

This epistle could have been written as early as 45 AD. Miraculous activity had already been flourishing in Jerusalem for over a decade through the apostles. But it appears from these verses in James and also in Acts 8:1 that the authority to heal spread from the apostles in Jerusalem to the elders of dispersed Jewish congregations in Judea and Samaria. Then it appears that, after the writing of this epistle, the authority to heal spread even further to people possessing the gift of healing in Gentile congregations based on 1 Cor. 12. What characterized each of these groups was that at this time in the history of the church, it was God's will for these specific individuals and groups of individuals to heal.

But now, we come to this question: Has God continued to give certain individuals or groups of individuals the authority to heal today? And I believe that the answer to that is no. This weekend, I will share with you the reasons I believe that this is true.

Before I give you the reasons why I believe that God is not continuing to give the authority to heal to certain individuals or groups of individuals today, I want to make it perfectly clear that I am not saying that God is not performing miracles today. God certainly, I believe, is performing miracles today. But it is not through individuals or groups of individuals who have been given the authority to heal.

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The apostles were given authority to heal. When they prayed for the healing of individuals, they could pray with a high degree of certainty that it was the will of God for them to heal based on **2 Cor. 12:12**. When the elders of the dispersed Jewish congregations prayed over individuals for physical healing, they could pray with a high degree of certainty that it was the will of God for them to heal based on **James 5:14-15**. When individuals who possessed the gift of healing among Gentile congregations prayed for the healing of individuals, they could pray with a high degree of certainty that it was God's will for them to heal based on **1 Cor. 12:9**.

These individuals and groups of individuals could pray with a high degree of certainty because they had been given the authority to heal. Today, when we pray for physical healings, we do not have this same high degree of certainty, because I do not believe that God has given any individual or group of individuals in our present day and age the authority to heal. Now, I would like to share with you the reasons why I believe this to be so.

THE PURPOSE OF MIRACLES

Miracles are primarily used by God to confirm an important message at a critical juncture in God's ongoing plan of redemption, delivered through His special messengers (Heb. 2:3-4). Let us read **Heb. 2:3-4** "**How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, (4) God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.**" In this passage we see the message of salvation being delivered by Christ to those who heard Him, or in other words, to His apostles. The apostles then delivered this message of salvation to the author of this epistle as well as others. Let me ask you this question: How did the author of this epistle and others actually know that the apostles were delivering the message of salvation given them by Christ? They knew because the miracles performed through the apostles confirmed their message. What is the purpose of miracles? Miracles are primarily used by God to confirm His message delivered through His messengers.

Now, let me ask you this question: Once God's message is confirmed and embraced by a particular generation as true, would there be any need from God's standpoint to reconfirm that confirmed message by additional signs and wonders to future generations? To help answer this question I believe it is helpful to look at the ebb and flow of miraculous activity in the Bible.

The first outburst of miraculous activity that we see in the Scriptures was in the time period of Moses in approximately 1450 to 1400 BC. This miraculous activity confirmed God's message through God's messenger. This resulted in the Jewish people leaving Egypt and eventually entering the Promised Land in possession of the Mosaic Law. Did the trustworthiness of the law from God's standpoint continually have to be confirmed to the Jews by signs and wonders subsequent to the original confirmation worked through Moses? The answer is clearly, "No, the Law did not have to be continually reconfirmed."

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In fact, when was the next outbreak of miraculous activity that we see in the Scriptures? We do not see the second outbreak of miraculous activity until the time of Elijah and Elisha in approximately the 9th. century BC more than 500 years after the death of Moses. Why do we suddenly, after over 500 years, again see an outburst of miraculous activity recorded for us in the Scripture? At the time when these two men were ministering, apostasy had become so widespread that worship of the one true God appeared to be on the brink of total extinction. What turned it around? It was a simple message by these simple men, confirmed by signs and wonders. What was that message? The Lord, He is God. Listen to the account of Elijah confronting the prophets of Baal in **1 Kings 18**. In this particular confrontation with the 450 prophets of Baal, listen how Elijah addresses the people in **V. 21, “And Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” But the people did not answer him a word.**” In response to their continuing hesitation, Elijah proposed a contest in which he challenges the prophets of Baal to call down fire from heaven to consume a prepared sacrifice. They accepted this challenge. But, of course, you will remember that they failed. After their failure, Elijah then approaches the sacrifice and the altar that he had prepared and he prays this prayer in **V. 36-37 “O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant , and that I have done all these things at Thy word. (37) Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that Thou, O Lord, art God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again.”** Then do you remember what happened? **(38) Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. (39) And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God.”** This simple message was, at this moment of crisis in the history of the nation of Israel, given and received after being confirmed by miracles. Now here comes the question: Did God think that this message needed to be repeatedly confirmed for the Jewish people through signs and wonders in successive generations? The answer is, no.

In fact, when was the next outbreak of miraculous activity that we see in the Scriptures? We do not see the third outbreak of miraculous activity until the time of Christ and the apostles over 800 years after the time of Elijah and Elisha.

Again, what is the point that I am trying to make? Miracles are primarily used by God to confirm an important message at a critical juncture in God’s ongoing work of redemption, delivered through His special messengers. Once that message has been confirmed, it does not, from God’s standpoint, need to be reconfirmed by signs and wonders through successive generations of special messengers. This is my first reason. What is my second reason?

THE BIBLICAL RECORD

If the primary purpose of miracles was in fact to confirm an important message at a critical juncture in God’s ongoing work of redemption, and did not need, from God’s standpoint, to be reconfirmed, which resulted in a diminishing of miraculous activity in the OT period, do we see this same pattern in the NT? I believe that the answer is yes.

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Let us now look at the NT and see if we can in fact see this same pattern developing. Obviously, we do not have enough biblical data to evaluate this question in light of the miraculous activity of the elders of these dispersed Jewish congregations since James 5:14-15 is the only passage that alludes to this particular group. Also, we do not have enough data concerning those possessing the gift of healing to answer this question because 1 Cor. 12 is the only passage that mentions this particular gift. But, we do have considerable information concerning the apostles and their healing ministry. So, let us begin by looking at the healing ministry of the apostles in Jerusalem to see if there was in fact an apparent diminishing of miraculous activity as the message of the gospel was confirmed.

The apostles early healing ministry in Jerusalem initially appears to be unrestrained (Acts 2-8). **Acts 2:43 “And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.”** How many signs and wonders were being done? It says many signs and wonders were being done. Who were performing these signs and wonders? The apostles were performing these signs and wonders. To give you a sense of the level of miraculous activity of the apostle’s I read for you **Acts 5:15-16.**

“As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them, as he passed by. (16) Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.” This is an incredible level of activity that appears to be totally unlimited. Everyone was being healed and they were being healed by any contact with the apostles that was initiated by faith.

The apostles' later healing ministry in Jerusalem, however, appears to be considerably more restrained (Acts 9-12). After the conversion of Paul in the latter half of 35 AD, recorded for us in **Acts 9**, until the setting apart of Barnabas and Saul for missionary work amongst the Gentiles in **Acts 13**, it appears that the level of miraculous activity by the apostles in Jerusalem was dramatically more restrained. During this time, there were only a few isolated, though extraordinary, miracles performed by the Apostle Peter.

When we look at the level of miraculous activity of the elders in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 2-12, there seems to be a dramatic diminishing of the level of miraculous activity as the message of the gospel was being confirmed. What appears to be the case with the apostles in Jerusalem is also seen in the Apostle Paul’s healing ministry amongst the Gentiles.

The Apostle Paul’s early healing ministry among the Gentile nations appears to be unrestrained (Acts 14:3-20). During Paul’s three missionary journeys recorded for us in **Acts 14:3 - 19:12**, which extended over the period of 10 years from 48 - 57 AD, an incredible level of miraculous healing activity occurred.

To demonstrate the truth of what I am saying, let us read **Acts 19:11-12.** This incident that I will be reading took place in Ephesus at the end of Paul’s third missionary journey **“(11) And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, (12) so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.”** This is an amazing level of activity.

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This level of activity was reminiscent of the initial unrestrained healing ministry of the Apostles in Jerusalem before Paul was sent out on his first missionary journey. But, did this level of activity continue? No!

The Apostle Paul's later healing ministry among the Gentile nations appears to be restrained (Acts 21-18; Phil. 2:25-27; 2 Tim. 4:19-20).

During his first imprisonment Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians. This was in approximately 62 AD, In Phil. 2:25-27 it talks about Epaphroditus being at the point of death but that God had mercy on him. The implication is clear. Paul for whatever reason had restrained himself from healing Epaphroditus as an apostle of Christ. It was the Lord's benevolent expression of mercy toward Paul that restored Epaphroditus to health.

An even more pointed example of the growing restraint of the Apostle Paul to heal is found in the latter part of his ministry is in **2 Tim. 4: 19-20** in his closing remarks to Timothy, **“Greet Priscilla, and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus. (20) Erastus remained at Corinth, but Trophimus I left sick at Miletus.”**

Clearly the healing ministry of Paul, which had been totally unrestrained in the early days of his ministry either by choice or by God's design, now had become more restrained in the latter days of his ministry. In fact, he had even begun to encourage Christians not to seek a miraculous healing. What was Paul's instruction to Timothy in **1 Tim. 5:23**? **“No longer drink water exclusively but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.”**

Looking at the biblical record it appears that the level of miraculous healing being done by the Apostles in Jerusalem and the Apostle Paul amongst the Gentile nations had gone from unrestrained to restrained over time. Why was this? I believe that the reason is because the message which the miracles confirmed was being confirmed and therefore steadily diminished the need for the miraculous. This belief is further demonstrated, I believe, by the following fact. Paul's later epistles and also the general epistles which were all written during Paul's first imprisonment or later have no reference to miracles at all. What is therefore my conclusion concerning the present application of the promise given to the Jewish churches of the dispersion that if a sick person called for the elders and prayed over him, that they would be healed. My conclusion is this the promise of James 5:14-15 does not apply today.

PRESENT DAY CONFIRMATION

Let me ask you this question: Is there any way for us to test the truth of what I have shared with you? I believe the answer is obvious. Though we certainly do not have apostles today and though we may not personally know anyone who claims to have the gift of healing, we do know of churches that actually have elders. In fact, Valley Bible is one of those churches.

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Over the years of my ministry at Valley Bible Church, the elders have on a few occasions been asked to go to a seriously ill person and pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. On those occasions, before I had come to the conclusion that I have shared with you this morning, I had gone with the elders of the church to those sick individuals. On each of those occasions, I would like to say to you that the person was healed, but the truth is they were not.

Why? Why would they not be healed when the passage clearly says, “and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick”? We had done everything that the passage called us to do. I believe the answer is quite simple. It was not because of sin. It was not because of a lack of faith. It was simply this: We were not the elders of dispersed Jewish congregations in the area of Judea and Samaria in an age when the message of salvation was being confirmed through miracles of healing.

CONCLUSION

Does this mean that miracles of healing cannot occur today when God’s children pray? And the answer is absolutely not. We have seen this very clearly communicated to us in **James 5:16-18**. We have only see this weekend that miracles of healing are not guaranteed through the agency of specific individuals or groups of individuals in order to confirm the gospel message of Christ because that message has already been confirmed.