

I Think This is the Real Power of Prayer

James 5:13-15

¹³Is there anyone among you who is in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.

Here's a little story about prayer ... (from the Hampshire Gazette).

Travelers along the eastbound stretch of the Massachusetts Turnpike between Palmer and Sturbridge may have seen a shrine that stands watch from a wooded glen. When it is illuminated at night, it appears in a clearing as if coming out of nowhere.

The statue attracts attention, as it may have yours. Travelers have been known call the police, or the local church, with questions. Some have been known to stop on the turnpike to leave prayer notes, flowers or Catholic rosaries.

The little shrine is known to some as "the Madonna of the Turnpike," or "the Lady of the Highway." It's a two-foot statue of Mary on a pedestal of field stones. It has stood there for 47 years since Alfred Brodeur erected it.

It was Alfred's mission to give glory to God that his wife, Eldora, diagnosed with breast cancer, and had recovered in part, he believes, because of their faith and their prayers.

As Alfred's daughter, Diane, says, "[My Dad] was just a little old farmer man who loved and believed in God. He put the statue here to thank [God] for my mother's [recovery] and to inspire faith and prayer in others who drove by."

I have no doubt that God answers prayers. I have no doubt the prayer impacts the outcome of illness. I have no doubt that God can and does suspend the ordinary to present the extraordinary. We have witnessed it in prayer groups when cancer was brought into remission for no known medical reason with Deacon Homer. We have seen the power of prayer when the mind of Governor Romney shifted for no known reason to grant release of the state covenants that were preventing us from building this campus. We felt the presence of God when prayers for relief workers in Haiti lead Big Kenny and his team to locate Walter's remains and bring closure to unmitigated grief. Consistently, prayer is a matter of moving with God and experiencing his blessings.

There's a reality here: prayer is not a silver bullet, a get-out-of-jail-free card for trouble. We get sick! My mother was sick. My sister had cancer. My uncle suffered with polio. I

battled Gianne Barre. We are not immune from getting sick, nor from death. And what does James encourage us to pray for? Health? Surely this is so. But more importantly, prayer with joy in the midst of sickness because our real healing will not always be of the physical body (though God does do this if He so wills) but of a soul that is blessed with joy even in the midst of pain.

James (5:13-15) holds two specific foci of prayer in tensions that are worth noting:

1. prayer when beset with trouble (maybe sick, emotionally or physically, spiritually hurting)-
2. and simultaneously, prayer of praise.

Just look in bibles, if you will, and catch the juxtaposition of petition and praise:

¹³Is there anyone among you who is in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.

Just as life is loaded with the vicissitudes between ups and downs, health and illness, prosperity and austerity, joy and sorrow, so prayer is filled with petition and praise.

By the time our spiritual journey gets to a New Testament realization of Christ Jesus as Messiah (and we have been brought into a one-on-one relationship with God; the portals of heaven have opened in our consciousness), the word we have come to translate as “sick,” or “ill,” and carries a connotation of “weakness,.” becomes buffeted with a serene sense of hope.

Consider this. The word ἀσθενεω that James uses here, literally means literally, “to be without strength,” ... when you are totally wasted, fatigued, bedridden, unable to work. It's the word describing Lazarus in John 11 when he is dead and buried. It is the word to describing Dorcas in Act 9. It is the same word describing the man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5, who sat there for years and years without enough energy to get up and get into the pools of ritual purification.

I have to love James here. He is driving my attention away from my physical illness and grief and sorrow and pain and death to a deeper question of “weakness”... .. spiritual weakness.

James is reminding us that when we are in trouble, the real concern is our spiritual health.

There was a period in my past of thirteen months when I was beset with depressions as I have never known before or since. I had lost my mother, my sister. The son of a pastoral colleague had committed suicide. I was without work. I felt like a failure. I couldn't get out bed because there was nothing to get out of bed for. I was riddled with guilt for things that were not my responsibility. I had no quest, no goal, no hope. I cannot fully describe emotional pain of depression. I stopped praying. I didn't open the bible. ... and I sat there for months emotionally comatose ... the until I realized the issue, for me at least, was less my mental illness, than my spiritual weakness. I had lost faith and convinced myself that I

was a mistake, not a child a child of God. There was no petition, let alone the idea of praise, and that is where we will stay, save for one undeniable fact: . . . Jesus.

Scan down to verse 15.

James notes that the affects of prayer are not necessarily physical recovery (although physical recovery is never beyond the power of God), but – catch this word – to rise!

“...the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person [or, the weak person, or the person without any strength, or the spiritually empty child of God]

“ ... will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up!”

Connect this verse (v 15) from James 5 with Paul’s discussion of “rising” in his letter to the Christians in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes,

⁴² *The body that is sown is perishable,
[yet] it is raised imperishable;*

⁴³ *it is sown in dishonor,
[yet] it is raised in glory;*

*it is sown in weakness,
[yet] it is raised in power;*

⁴⁴ *it is sown a natural body,
[yet] it is raised a spiritual body.*

I see here the same tension of petition and praise that I see in James.

The hope of the Gospel is not only the power of God to heal our infirmities, but – more importantly – to raise our souls to glory in their weakness. Spiritual wholeness!

How do we pray about our problems? For health? Okay, ... but not on the presumption that prayer is a magic bullet to manipulate the laws of nature. But... prayer for health and recovery of our weakened soul in the midst of trouble! That’s the key. And that makes us happy.

My mother took ill, and died. My sister was stricken with cancer, and died. My uncle fought the residual effects of polio, and died. But, I know that their illness and suffering did not overcome them with spiritual weakness, but were raised to wholeness.

Some of you may be familiar with singer K.D. Lang’s rendition of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah.” She sang it at the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. The lyrics recount David’s folly with Bathsheba, Sampson’s betrayal by Delilah, and then by the third verse it breaks into contemporary imagery of painful love and broken relationships with the words, “It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah.”

Yes, there is a lot of ecstatic music in worship. Handel's Hallelujah chorus is unmatched. David is known to have gotten giddy with cymbals, drums, trumpets, harps and dancing. What gives these moments their ecstasy is not a pill of denial, but a submersion in reality baptized by a rising soul!

"Praise" is used 550 times in the Bible. It is a lifestyle of the Christian: to be joyful. So in the ICU, I give thanks for the nurses. I give thanks for the hospital. I give thanks for the morphine. And yes, I pray for recovery. So, when the family is falling apart, I give thanks for my wife. I give thanks for my kids. I give thanks for the honesty. And yes, I pray for reconciliation. So when there are more bills than income, I give thank that the house is still warm. I give thanks that for the love between the family. And yes, I pray for wisdom to handle the deficit.

I am continually touched by Carrie Ten Boom's experience when held by the Nazi's for harboring Jews in the 1930's. Affectively, her life was over, and yet her soul soared.

In the lice infected barracks of Ravensbrück (through which an estimated 90,000 women and children died), Carrie Ten Boom still sang hymns, recited the Psalms and gave praise to God.

Why? Because, and as James emphasized, in her deprived physical state, God constantly rose her up her soul to a greater praise of spiritual health.