

### XIII. Fervent Prayer

March 23/25/26, 2020

James 5:13-20

OT: Ps 139:23-24; Pr. 28:13;

NT: Mk. 6:7-13; Jn. 9:1-3

1 Kgs. 17:1; 18:1, 41-46

**Aim:** To adopt a lifestyle of prayer and praise in all situations, knowing that God hears and answers prayers both for physical and spiritual restoration.

*Morgan:* This passage has been a battleground for interpreters throughout the ages. Various groups have used it as a proof-text for their favorite theological soapbox, and many have been confused because certain faith healers have misapplied the verses.

*MacArthur:* This passage has been a battleground for interpreters over the centuries as various groups have used it as a proof text for their particular beliefs. Roman Catholics find in it biblical support for the sacrament of extreme unction. Faith healers of every stripe have used it to teach that all sick Christians are guaranteed healing through prayers. Still others see in it a precedent for anointing sick people with oil. [DSB Note: this last is the vast majority opinion; MacArthur is in a distinct minority on his position].

*Morgan:* That this final section of James' letter deals with four life problems and one primary solution is not at all surprising. The emphasis throughout has been on consistent living in the community of faith.... The title 'Wisdom and Prayer' fits because all four subjects are concerned with putting our faith to work in the most practical, down-to-earth, prayerful ways. Faith must be put to work in all of life's ups and downs. The four human experiences are: 1) Suffering (5:13); 2) Joy (5:13); 3) Sickness (5:14-18); and 4) Wandering (5:19-20).

*Doriani:* The topic of healing seems to arise abruptly in James, but it fits perfectly with the themes of chapters 4 and 5. You will recall that James promises grace to those who embrace gospel humility (4:10).... In the next section, James warns of three sins against humility: slander (4:11-12), presumptuous planning for riches (4:13-17), and abuse of wealth and power (5:1-6). Next, James proposes three antidotes to arrogance. Each reverses one of the sins of pride. James lists them in chiasmic order.

- A. We must not slander and judge our brothers (4:11-12)
- B. We do not plan presumptuously (4:13-17)
- C. The rich must not exploit the poor (5:1-6)
- C'. If the rich exploit us, we will wait until the Lord, the Judge, comes (5:7-12)
- B'. We do not make proud plans, but take our joys and sorrows to God (5:13-18)
- A'. If our brother sins, we don't slander; we correct and restore him (5:19-20)

#### A. Seeking Physical Restoration (James 5:13-18)

*Moo:* An encouragement to pray is typical of the concluding sections of NT letters. Also typical of Hellenistic letters in general is a concluding 'health' wish. James combines the two by encouraging prayer especially for physical ailments. Prayer is clearly the topic of this paragraph, being mentioned in every verse. James commends it to the individual believer, in the very different kinds of circumstances that he may face (vv. 13-14), and to the community as well (v.

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16a). And he encourages such prayer by underscoring the powerful effects of prayer that flow from a righteous heart (vv. 16b-18).

*Moo:* James's exhortation to pray in vv. 13-18 stands out among similar such requests at the end of NT letters (Rom. 15:30-32; Eph. 6:18-20; Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2-4; 1 Th. 5:17, 25; 2 Th. 3:1-2; Heb. 13:18-19) for its detail and length.

*MacArthur:* The theme of verses 13-18...is prayer, which is mentioned in every one of those verses. James's exhortation to prayer embraces the prayer life of the entire church. Individual believers are called to pray in verse 13, elders in verses 14-15, and the congregation in v. 16. This section also reflects James's compassionate pastoral care for his suffering flock.

*Dorani:* So then, prayers for healing are part of the life of gospel humility. Yet James wants to do more than oppose arrogance one more time. He tells the church to pray in every setting of life, to take every concern to our Sovereign Lord.... James 5 also describes various groups of people and when they pray. Individuals pray for joys and sorrows (5:13-14), elders pray over sickness (5:14-15), friends pray over sins they've committed (5:16), and prophets pray in time of need (5:17-18). Whatever our condition, whatever our circumstance, we should take it to the Lord in prayer.

### 1. Situations for Prayer (5:13-15)

#### a) *Are You Suffering? (5:13a)*

<sup>13</sup>*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.*

#### (1) Suffering (5:13a)

*Morgan:* The word 'suffering' emphasizes the internal distress caused by outward circumstances. It translates *kakopatheō*, 'to feel or experience bad or evil.' It is the verb form of the corresponding noun we saw in verse 10. It denotes the experience of misfortune or calamity.... James may have had in mind the persecution he had just discussed in verses 1-6. Or he may have been pointing to more general vicissitudes that afflict us all – problems, difficulties, hardships, and trials.

*MacArthur:* The objects of James's pastoral care are identified first as the weary, 'suffering' believers. 'Suffering' is from *kakopatheō*, the verb form of the noun translated 'suffering' in verse 10.... The word refers to enduring evil treatment by people—not physical illness (cp. its only other New Testament uses in 2 Tim. 2:9; 4:5). James addresses not those suffering from physical diseases, but those being persecuted, abused, and treated wickedly. [DSB Note: Fair, this question is about suffering, not illness. But the third question (in v. 14), is about illness, not suffering.]

*Moo:* *Is any one of you in trouble?* The NIV *in trouble* translates the verbal form of the word James used in v. 10 to describe the 'suffering' of the prophets. The word has the basic sense of 'experience difficulty' and is used in the LXX with the meaning 'take trouble,' 'work hard at' (Jon. 1:10; cp Mal. 1:13). But the sense 'experience trouble' is found in the other NT occurrences of the verb.... Taken together...the data suggest that the word has a broad application, covering trials of all kinds.

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### (2) Pray (5:13a)

*Moo:* How are those who are suffering in these various ways to respond? They are to *pray*. The Greek word here is *proseuchomai*, the most common word for prayer in the NT (over 80 occurrences). James uses the verb only in this paragraph (see also vv. 14, 17, and 18; the cognate noun, *proseuchē*, occurs only in v. 17 in James). Because the verb is so general in its meaning and application no certainty about the content of the prayer that James calls for here can be attained. Perhaps James would include petition to God to remove the trial. But James's concern when he deals with trials elsewhere (1:2-4, 12; 5:7-11) is to encourage believers to endure the suffering with the right spirit and with a divine perspective on history. Presumably, then, the prayer that he encourages here is for the spiritual strength to endure the trial with a godly spirit.

*Morgan:* As an antidote, James instructs us to 'pray' and make it a constant practice to take our concerns to God. We should not grumble, seek to retaliate against wrongdoers, or even simply 'grin and bear it' like a Stoic. Rather, we should individually and collectively turn to God for relief and deliverance.

*MacArthur:* As an antidote to their suffering, James exhorts them to 'pray.... Prayer is essential to enduring affliction. God is the ultimate source of comfort.... The present tense of the verb translated 'he must pray' suggests a continual pleading with God in prayer; it could be translated 'let him keep praying.' When life is difficult, when believers are weak in faith, weary with persecution, and crushed by affliction, they must continually plead with God to comfort them. That is a basic spiritual truth, but one often forgotten.

*Hughes:* This was a command that James personally lived out as evidenced by his own body, for the ancient historian Eusebius testified that 'his knees grew hard like a camel's because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people.' Just as a laborer's hands testify to his occupation, or a runner's feet to his training, James' callused knees testified to a life of serious prayer. So, we ought to listen to what he says, not only because he is the Lord's earthly brother, and not only because his writing is Scripture, but because he 'walked his talk'—*on his knees*.

### b) Are You Sunny? (5:13b)

*Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.*

### (1) Cheerful (5:13b)

*Moo:* The other situation that James mentions in the verse is not an exact opposite to being *in trouble*. For, as the NIV rendering *happy* suggests, the Greek word that James uses in his second question (*euthymeō*) connotes a state of the emotions rather than an outward circumstance. The verb occurs elsewhere in the NT only in Acts 27:22 and 25, where it denotes the 'peace of mind' that Paul encourages his fellow passengers to have despite the raging storm that was tearing apart their ship.

*Morgan:* The Greek word for 'joyful' is *euthymeō* and describes one who is well in spirit and has a joyful attitude. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and is much deeper than happiness, which is a fleeting emotion related to favorable circumstances.

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*MacArthur:* Those who manage to maintain a ‘cheerful’ attitude in their suffering are ‘to sing praises.’ ‘Cheerful’ is from *euthumeō* and describes those well in spirit, or having a joyful attitude—not those who are physically well.

### (2) Praise (5:13b)

*Moo:* A reminder to turn to God is needed even more in times of cheer than in times of suffering. James specifically exhorts the community to *sing songs of praise*. The Greek verb here is *psallō*, from which we get the word ‘psalm.’ While the verb means simply ‘sing,’ all three of its other NT occurrences connote a song of praise to God (Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:19; so the cognate noun in 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 2:6). So, especially coming from the one who is doing well, the song here is almost certainly a song of praise to the Lord.... Giving praise to God, like our petitions for sustenance in times of trouble (*proseuchesthō*, ‘pray,’ is also present tense), should be a regular part of our lifestyle.

*Morgan:* We...tend to forget about God in times of success and happiness, and we forget to be grateful when things are going our way. James instructs us, however, to develop a thankful attitude toward God when life is going favorably for us. We are to ‘sing praises.’ It is the Greek *psallō*, a descriptive term that gives us our word ‘Psalms.’ It is used in Acts 13:33; 1 Corinthians 14:26; and Ephesians 5:19. Psalms are the soul’s expressions of joyful prayer, as the petitions of praise ‘sing’ their way to God.

*MacArthur:* *Psallō* (‘sing praises’) is the verb from which the noun translated ‘psalm’ derives (cp. Acts 13:33; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19).

*Dorani:* James’s main concern is prayer in times of trouble, but we must notice his interest in prayer during good times. If anyone is happy, James exhorts, ‘let him sing songs of praise.’ ... Use songs to rejoice in God’s blessings. Praise God for His salvation, for His gifts, for His daily providence. By stating the command in the present tense, James implies that such prayer is an element of daily life.... Whatever happens, we go to God in prayer. If happy, we praise (5:13b). If troubled, we pray (5:13a). If suffering and weak, we pray with the church elders (5:14a).

### (3) All of Life

*MacArthur:* The suffering and the happy, the wounded, broken spirits and the whole, rejoicing spirits are both to pray.... Praise and prayer are closely related; praise is actually a form of prayer (Phil. 4:6; Col. 4:2). Both are essential for the spiritual strength of those undergoing persecution.

*Dorani:* Believers pray. If we face illness or loss, we pray, lest we rebel against God. If we meet with success, we praise God, lest we give ourselves credit. Through prayer, we *hallow every pleasure and sanctify every pain*.

*Hughes:* His commands are a congenial attack on the universal human tendency during trouble to get angry or indulge in self-pity or complain, or on the other hand, when one is untroubled and happy, to forget God. James commands that Christians pray throughout the whole spectrum of emotions. Whether low or high, at the bottom or the top, in the pits or on the pinnacle, either prayer or praise is appropriate.

#### c) *Are You Sick? (5:14-15)*

##### (1) Is Anyone Among You Sick? (5:14a)

<sup>14</sup>*Is anyone among you sick?*

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### (a) *The Meaning of the Greek Word*

*Moo:* James now mentions a third circumstance in which prayer is especially needed: sickness. The Greek word behind the NIV's *is sick* is *astheneō*, 'to be weak.' This word and its cognate noun (*astheneia*) and adjective (*asthenēs*) are applied to all kinds of situations in the NT: mental ability (e.g., Rom. 6:19); spiritual condition (Rom. 5:6); general physical appearance (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:10); the conscience (e.g., 1 Cor. 8:7, 9; cp. Rom. 14:1, 2); or one's bodily constitution. In this last sense, the word means simply to be 'sick' or 'ill,' and this is the sense almost universally given the word in this verse.

*Morgan:* No particular sickness is identified. The word for 'sick' is general, *astheneō*, meaning to be weak or sick. It is used thirty-two times in the New Testament to refer to both particular maladies as well as physical or emotional weakness caused by an illness. Like James' original readers, we easily feel defeated in times of sickness. Perhaps that is why James includes the elders here, whereas the first two experiences called simply for prayer on the part of the individual. Weaknesses make us feel hopeless, as if there is nothing we can do. The biblical outlook is the opposite; there is something very significant to do, namely, to prayer. Weakness is the very time for prayer.

*Dorani:* James's primary focus is prayer for physical needs. The word he chooses for 'sick' literally means 'weak.' If the context makes it clear, the term can refer to spiritual or mental weakness (Rom. 5:6; 6:19; cp. 4:19), or even a troubled conscience (Rom. 14:1-2; 1 Cor. 8:7-10). Certainly, chronic physical illness, can afflict the spirit. Yet James chiefly refers to the sick who need physical healings (5:16).

*MacArthur:* It is true that, apart from the present verse, *astheneō* is translated 'sick' eighteen times in the New Testament (e.g., Mt. 10:8; 25:36, 39; Mk. 6:56; Lk. 4:40; Jn. 4:46; Acts 9:37). But it is also used fourteen times to refer to emotional or spiritual weakness (Acts 20:35; Rom. 4:19; 8:3; 14:1-2; 1 Cor. 8:11-12; 2 Cor. 11:21, 29; 12:10; 13:3-4, 9)... Paul's use of *astheneō* in 2 Corinthians 12:10 is especially noteworthy, since it there describes weakness produced by the suffering of life—in a similar context as its usage in the present verse.

### (b) *Interpreted as Spiritual Weakness*

[DSB Note: Only MacArthur takes this extreme minority view. All other commentators take the traditional view that James is talking about physical illness.]

*Moo:* But a few scholars have proposed an alternative meaning, 'to be spiritually weak.' The word can have this sense, and so can the word translated 'sick' in the NIV of v. 15 (*kamnō*). Moreover, the language of v. 16 – that you may be healed' – usually has a spiritual connotation in the NT. And other key words in the context, it is argued, point in the same direction: 'save' (*sōzō*; translated 'make well' in the NIV) and 'raise up' in v. 15. What James is describing, these scholars contend, is a person who is spiritually weak. The spiritual leaders of the church need to pray for this person so that his or her fervor for the Lord might be restored. An exhortation to pray for such a situation would fit very well at the end of a letter that has regularly chastised its readers for just such spiritual lassitude.

*MacArthur:* As the context and the content of this section make clear, the subject is not physical illness or healing. Instead, its concern is with healing spiritual weakness, spiritual weariness, spiritual exhaustion, and spiritual depression through prayer, as well as dealing with the suffering and sin that accompanies it. To insert a discussion here on physical healing would be

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incongruous. Nothing in the preceding or following context would prepare James's readers for that. But a section on how to help the casualties of persecution through prayer fits perfectly into the flow of James's thought.

*MacArthur*: Translating *astheneō* 'weak' here in keeping with its predominant usage in the epistles [DSB Note: James much more closely follows the Gospels than the Pauline epistles!] allows us to view this verse in a different light. James moves beyond the suffering believers of the previous point to address specifically those who have become weak by that suffering. The weak are those who have been defeated in the spiritual battle, who have lost the ability to endure their suffering. They are the fallen spiritual warriors, the exhausted, weary, depressed, defeated Christians.... Having hit bottom, they are not able to pray effectively on their own. In that condition, the spiritually weak need the help of the spiritual strong (cp. 1 Th. 5:14).

### (c) *Defended as Physical Illness*

*Moo*: But the usual view, adopted in virtually all modern English Bibles, that James is speaking here of physical illness, is overwhelmingly likely. When *astheneō* refers to spiritual weakness, this meaning is made clear by a qualifier ('in conscience' in 1 Cor. 8:7; 'in faith' in Rom. 14:1, 2) or by the context. More importantly, in the NT material that has exercised the greatest influence on James's vocabulary and theology (the Gospels), *astheneō* always denotes physical illness (Mt. 10:8; 25:36, 39; Mk. 6:56; Lk. 4:40; Jn 4:46; 5:3, 7; 6:2; 11:1, 2, 3, 6). The same is true of the cluster of terms and concepts that we find here. The verb 'save' is frequently used in the Gospels to denote the restoration of those who are ill; as is, as we might expect, the verb 'heal' (v. 16). But perhaps the most striking parallel comes with the reference to 'anointing with oil.' Only once else in the NT is the practice mentioned and then as a means of physical healing (Mk. 6:13).

*Dorani*: How sick does one have to be? James seems to have a major malady in view. The terms for the illness suggest something serious. The sick person is, literally, 'weak' (*asthenei*) in James 5:14. In 5:15 James uses the stronger term *kamnō*. It means 'wear out' and suggests the weariness or exhaustion that often accompanies illness. It reminds us that sickness exhausts the spirit as well as the body. Pastorally speaking, this suggests that elders could lay hands on and pray for Christians who are afflicted spiritually. Depression, stress, and anxiety can wear us out more than some illnesses.

### (2) Let Him Call for the Elders of the Church (5:14b)

*Let him call for the elders of the church...*

#### (a) *Let Him Call for (5:14b)*

*Dorani*: Notice that the sick person takes the initiative. He calls the elders, perhaps because he cannot travel.

*Moo*: Unlike the first two general situations James mentioned in v. 13, the believer (note *one of you*) who is ill is not commanded to pray for himself but to *call the elders of the church to pray over him*.

*Morgan*: The praying process involves three elements that demand our attention. *First*, the suffering person 'calls for the elders of the church. The sick one should 'call' for the spiritually mature, strong, wise men of the church. 'Call' is from *proskaleo*, to call alongside for help. It is

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the verb from which we get the title *Paraclete* for the Holy Spirit. He is the One called alongside to help us! Calling for the elders is an act of obedience and faith.

*MacArthur:* Weak, defeated believers are to go to [the elders] and draw on their strength. They are to ‘call’ (from *proskaleō*, ‘to call alongside’) the elders to come and lift them up. It is the same thought that the apostle Paul expressed in Galatians 6:1.

*Hughes:* James clearly places the responsibility for initiating the procedure on the sick person, not on the church leadership. This does not exclude pastors or elders from suggesting that the sick person consider calling for the healing ministry, but the request must come from the ill. This is most important, for the explicit instruction to call for the elders makes two *implicit* personal demands on the ill. The first is that before one calls on the elder *there must be personal confession of all known sins* (cp. v. 15)... The second demand implicit in the sick person’s calling for the elders is *the subjective sense that this is what the Holy Spirit is directing him to do*. We must realize it is not always God’s will for a sick person to call for the elders to pray the prayer of faith and to be healed, for ultimately we will all have a sickness or trauma that will result in death. Our calling for the elders must not be a whim—‘Sure, I’ll try anything!’—but with a definite sense that it is God’s will. This can be difficult because often when we are sick we are too ill to think clearly, much less pray with concentration about God’s will.... The overall point here is that James is recommending that when one is ill, he or she, having confessed all known sin, should prayerfully consider calling for the elders of the church. Too few Christians even consider this in our secular, mechanistic age.

### (b) *The Elders of the Church (5:14b)*

*Morgan:* Scholars differ over whether the ‘elders’ (*presbuteroi*) are men holding a specific office in the church or whether it refers to a class of individuals who are spiritually mature. It is clear that the church chose elders early in its history, and James certainly reflects some of the earliest ecclesiology we know of. The elder is an alternate description of the pastor or pastors of local churches (see Acts 11:30; 15:2; 20:17). The use of ‘church’ (*ecclesia*) rather than synagogue, as in 2:2, is instructive. The early church certainly had its origins in the setting of the Jewish synagogue, and kinship in worship and structure are not surprising.

*Moo:* Elders are mentioned in the book of Acts in connection with the church in Jerusalem (11:30; 15:2; 21:18) and the churches founded through Paul (14:23; 20:17). Although in his letters Paul refers to elders by name only in 1 Timothy 5:17 and Titus 1:5, ‘overseer’ (*episkopos*), mentioned in the plural in Phil. 1:1 and in the singular (*episkopēs*, ‘office of elder’) in 1 Tim. 3:1, is probably a different title for the same office. Both Peter (1 Pe. 5:1) and James assume the ministry of elders in the church, showing that the office was well established in the early church. The prominent role of the elders in Acts and the description of the office in the Pastoral Epistles suggest that elders were spiritually mature men who guided the spiritual development of local congregations. Since the Ephesian elders were to ‘shepherd’ or ‘pastor,’ their flocks (Acts 20:28), and ‘pastors’ are never mentioned along with elders in the NT, it is probable that the function of what we know as the pastor or minister was carried out by the elders. Hence, it is natural that the believer who is suffering from illness should summon the elders.

*Dorani:* Elders are the permanent local leaders of the church. The Jerusalem church had elders who served under the apostles (Acts 15:2-6, 22-23). Paul appointed elders to oversee the churches he planted (14:23; 20:17-28). They continued Paul’s work, overseeing his churches in

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his absence (20:28-32). The apostles commissioned elders to watch the flock (1 Pe. 5:2)... As shepherds, elders come alongside the people to serve. As overseers, they know the need of the people better than they know themselves. Yet above all, an elder is to be an example of godliness and faith (1 Tim. 3:2-3; 1 Pe. 5:3).

*MacArthur*: ‘The elders of the church’... are the spiritually strong, the spiritually mature, the spiritually victorious. Weak defeated believers are to go to them and draw on their strength... The wounded, exhausted, broken sheep are to go to their shepherds, who will intercede for them and ask God for renewed spiritual strength on their behalf. This is an important—and largely neglected—ministry of the church’s pastors and elders.

### (3) Anointing with Oil (5:14d)

...*anointing him with oil*...

#### (a) Sequence of Anointing

*Morgan*: *Second*, they are to ‘anoint him with oil.’ ... The tense of the participle ‘anointing’ is aorist and may mean that the action in the participle happens *prior to* that of the main verb. The Greek text reads, ‘after anointing him in the name of the Lord let them pray over him.’

*Moo*: In addition to praying for the sick person, James also commands the elders to *anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord*. James might imply that the anointing is to precede the praying (since the participle *aleipsantes* is aorist), but he probably intends them to be taking place at the same time (a contemporaneous aorist).

*Hughes*: It is difficult to determine from the language of this verse whether the anointing is to take place before or during the prayer, but what is clear is that not the anointing but the prayer (the main verb) is by far the most important action.

#### (b) Greek Words for Anointing

*Morgan*: ‘Anointing’ is from *aleiphō*, ‘to anoint or rub down.’ ‘Oil’ is *elaion*, ‘olive oil’ that was used in cooking in lamps, and in treating injuries (see Mk. 6:13; Lk. 10:34).

*Moo*: Scripture employs two Greek words that mean ‘anoint’: *chriō* and *aleiphō*. James’s choice of the latter word in v. 14 may shed light on the significance he attributes to the action. *Aleiphō* is used only twenty times in the Septuagint. Of dubious relevance are the seven times where the word refers to rubbing whitewash on a wall (all in Ezekiel). But the word frequently refers to the rubbing of oil on the face or body with a beautifying or hygienic purpose (nine times). And the verb has a ceremonial significance in four verses. The precise meaning of Gen. 31:13 is unclear, but in Ex 40:15 (twice) and Num. 3:3 *aleiphō* denotes the ceremonial anointing of the priests, whereby they were set apart for the service of God. This last usage is the regular significance of *chriō* in the Septuagint. In most of its seventy-eight occurrences, it designates the consecration of priests, sanctuary furnishings, or the king of Israel. Only three times does it refer to cosmetic treatment. Significantly, neither word is used with reference to medicinal purposes in the Septuagint. The NT usage of *chriō* maintains this pattern and extends it. For the word never refers to a physical act but is always a metaphor for consecration (Lk. 4:18 [=Is. 61:1]; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9 [=Ps. 45:7]). As in the Septuagint, *aleiphō* most often designates a cosmetic or hygienic anointing (Mt. 6:17; Mk. 16:1; Lk. 7:38. 46 [twice]; Jn. 11:2;

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12:3). It is possible, however, that the word has some symbolic overtones in the account of Jesus' anointing (Jn. 11:2; 12:3).

*Doriani:* There are two terms for anointing in the New Testament and the LXX, *chriō* and *aleiphō*. While they overlap slightly, the former typically denotes anointing for office, and the latter usually refers to anointing for cosmetics, hygiene, or celebration.

*MacArthur:* The 'anointing with oil in the name of the Lord' done by the elders is not a reference to some symbolic ceremony. *Aleiphō* (the root form of the verb translated 'anointing') is not used in the New Testament to refer to a ceremonial anointing.... *Aleiphō* in the New Testament describes anointing one's head with oil (Mt. 6:17; cp. Lk. 7:46), the women's anointing of Jesus' body (Mk. 16:1), Mary's anointing of the Lord's feet (Jn. 11:2; 12:3), and anointing the sick with oil (Mk. 6:13). Perhaps the best way to translate the phrase would be 'rubbing him with oil in the name of the Lord'; it literally reads 'after having oiled him.'

### (c) Reasons for Anointing

*Doriani:* The elders anoint the sick with oil. The disciples used oil in their healing ministry at least once (Mk. 6:13), but neither James nor Mark explains the purpose of the anointing. Several views of the anointing will oil have arisen in Christian thought. First, we must decide if the anointing is medical or spiritual in nature.

*Morgan:* Throughout history the act commanded here by James has been interpreted in significantly different ways.... We can summarize the interpretations of this passage into four groups.

*Moo:* What does James think that the anointing will accomplish? The practice is mentioned only one other time in the NT: Mark says that the Twelve 'drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them' (6:13). Unfortunately, Mark gives no more an explanation for the anointing than does James. Theologians and scholars have debated the meaning of the practice for a long time. Interpretations can be divided into two main categories, with subdivisions in each.

#### (i) Medicinal

*Moo:* 1. A Practical Purpose: a. *Medicinal.* Oil was widely used in the ancient world both as a skin conditioner and as a medicine (e.g., Lk. 10:34).... We might suppose that James is urging the elders to come to the bedside of the sick armed with both spiritual and natural resources – with prayer and with medicine. Both are administered with the Lord's authority, and both together can be used by him in healing the sick.

*Morgan:* 4) A number of writers contend that the oil of James 5:14 is merely a *medicinal* item which, together with the prayer, would be *providentially* efficacious in the healing process. Though [the *symbolic* view, below] may very well be the correct one, we need to develop the plausibility of this interpretation.... Medicinally, this act was soothing as it provided relief from fevers when one was fanned after the rubbing down with oil. With medicine in a primitive condition at the time, it may well be that they rubbed oil on the wounds of those who had been beaten as persecuted for following Christ.

*MacArthur:* It may well have been that the elders literally rubbed oil on believers who had suffered physical injuries to their bodies from persecution (cp. Lk. 10:34).

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*Moo:* The medicinal view is problematic for two reasons, First, evidence that anointing with oil was used for *any* medical problem is not found – and why mention only one (albeit widespread) remedy when many different illnesses would be encountered. Second, why should the elders of the church do the anointing, if its purpose were solely medical? Surely others would have done this already were it an appropriate remedy for the complaint.

*Doriani:* The anointing cannot be purely medicinal. Oil was used medicinally on rare occasions (Lk. 10:34), and the apostles are no foes of medical treatment (Paul urged Timothy to take wine for his stomach in 1 Tim. 5:23). But the call to the elders and to prayers shows that the purpose is not primarily medical. Finally, even if oil helped some maladies, no one thought oil healed every illness.

*Hughes:* Though oil was used for medical purposes in the ancient world, the use here is not medicinal.

### (ii) Friendship

*Morgan:* (1) Some scholars think that ‘anointing referred to by James is simply a refreshing, encouraging act of friendship, much like when Mary anointed Jesus’ feet (Jn. 12:3; Lk. 7:46). They argue that the Greek word *aleiphō* (‘anoint’) has to do with common rituals rather than a religious ceremony. In this sense, James’ admonition would be a call for the elders’ prayers, accompanied by the cultural expression of that day which reflected love and friendship.

### (iii) Pastoral

*Moo:* 1b. *Pastoral.* As a different kind of practical purpose, others suggest that the anointing may have been intended as an outward, physical expression of concern and as a mean to stimulate the faith of the sick person. Jesus sometimes used physical props in His healings, apparently with just such a purpose.

*Morgan:* Others suggest that oil was used as a daily item of toiletry in ancient times (much like cosmetics or perfumes are used today). In periods of sickness, distress, or fasting, this casual use of oil was suspended (cp. Ruth 3:3; 2 Sam. 12:20; 14:2; Dan. 10:2, 3; Mic. 6:15; Mt. 6:16, 17). It is argued, therefore, that James may be exhorting the brethren to accompany their prayers with the ‘anointing of oil,’ i.e., the resumption of their *normal* activities. The oil would serve as a token of *confidence* in the power of their petition. While this concept may be possible, it does not readily commend itself to the ordinary expositor. Also, it does not explain why the elders would be called to administer the oil.

*MacArthur:* Metaphorically, the elder’s ‘anointing’ of the weak, defeated believers with oil conveys the responsibility for elders to stimulate, encourage, strengthen, and refresh (cp. Lk. 7:46) these people.

### (iv) Sacramental

*Moo:* 2. A Religious Purpose: a. *Sacramental.* A sacramental understanding of this practice arose early in the history of the church. On the basis of this text the early Greek church practiced what they called the *Euchelaion* (a combination of the words *euchē*, ‘prayer,’ and *elaion*, ‘oil,’ both used in this text), which had the purpose of strengthening the body and soul of the sick. The Western church continued this practice for many centuries, as well as using oil for anointing on other occasions. Later, the Roman church gave to the priest the exclusive right to perform

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this ceremony and developed the sacrament of extreme unction (in 852 AD). This sacrament has the purpose of removing any remnant of sin and of strengthening the soul of the dying (healing is considered only a possibility. The Council of Trent (14.1) found this sacrament ‘insinuated’ in Mark 6:13 and ‘promulgated’ in James 5:14. Since Vatican II, the rite has been called ‘the anointing of the sick.’ Clearly this developed sacrament has little basis in James’s text: he recommends anointing for any illness and associates it with healing rather than preparation for death.

*Hughes:* Neither is it sacramental. It is not a ‘vehicle of divine power’ that by application promotes healing in the ill—*ex opera operato*. Also, this verse provides not basis for the Roman Catholic Church’s sacrament of extreme unction, wherein the dying is anointed with oil with the purpose of removing any remnant of sin and strengthening the soul for dying. A simple reading of the text makes it clear that the anointing with oil is to promote healing, not to ease dying.

*Doriani:* If the meaning is spiritual, it is neither an anointing for office (as in the Old Testament) nor a sacrament as the Roman Catholic tradition has claimed). James does not mention consecration for any office—whether prophet, priest, king, or church leader—in our passage. Nor is there anything like the custom of last rites, in which priests anoint the sick to remove remnants of sin from the dying soul. James stresses the efficacy of the prayer, not the oil, and he hopes for the healing of the living, rather than the salvation of the dying.

*Morgan:* Even if one takes this to be a ceremonial rite. Two observations are needed. First, it is not the oil that heals. See Mark 6:13 for a use of anointing with oil during the time of Jesus’ public ministry. Most of the stories of healing by Jesus and His disciples have no mention of oil, and James’ emphasis here is certainly on the power of the Lord rather than on any power in the oil.... The second observation is that this has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic Church’s doctrine of extreme unction, which is a ritual performed when the priests expect one to die and as a preparation for death. What is in view in 5:14-15 is restoration to life and health.

### (v) Symbolic

*Moo:* 2b. *Symbolic.* Anointing frequently symbolizes the consecration of the persons or thing for God’s use and service in the OT. Typical is Ex. 28:41.... The same usage is continued and expanded in the NT, where anointing is often a metaphor for consecration to God’s service (Lk. 4:18 [= Is. 61:1]; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:19 [=Ps. 45:7]). If James has this background in mind, then he would be recommending that the elders anoint the sick person in order vividly to show how that person is being set apart for God’s special attention in prayer.

*Morgan:* 3) The most common interpretation holds that the use of oil was a *symbolic* act. In Bible times the practice of anointing with oil was frequently representative of God’s approval (see 1 Sam. 10:1; Ps. 89:20). Many biblical scholars are fairly confident, therefore, that the application of oil in James 5:14 is a symbolic act invoked in conjunction with *supernatural* healing.

### (d) Conclusion on Anointing

*Moo:* The significance of these data for James 5:14 is not clear. One could argue that James would have used *chriō* if he had intended the anointing to have symbolic significance, since this is the word that most often has this connotation in Scripture. On the other hand, considering NT usage, *aleiphō* was the only word James could have chosen if he wanted to signify an actual physical act of anointing. And neither word has medicinal significance in Scripture....

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Lexicography does not, then, definitely rule in or out any of the four main options. But other factors suggest that James probably view the anointing as a physical action symbolizing consecration. Positively, as we have seen, this is by far the most common symbolic significance of anointing in the Bible. Negatively, each of the other views suffers from one or more serious difficulties.

*Doriani*: More likely, the anointing stimulated the faith of the sick person.... Similarly, oil is a sign of God's power to heal. Thus, the anointing has a spiritual meaning.

*Moo*: The pastoral interpretation has much to be said for it, and can be incorporated into the view we are arguing. But the value of the anointing does not lie in any physical connection between the action and the malady, as was the case with most of Jesus's healings (cp. Mk. 8:23-26; 7:33).... It lies, rather, in the symbolic connotations of the anointing. One's attitude toward the sacramental view will depend considerably on one's view of the sacraments in general. But James's insistence in v. 15 that the sick person is healed through 'the prayer of faith' suggests that the anointing itself does not convey the grace of healing power.

*Moo*: We conclude, therefore, that 'anoint' in v. 14 refers to a physical action with symbolic significance. The verb *aleiphō* can have this meaning.... And while *chriō* is usually used in these texts, James has probably chosen *aleiphō* because he refers to a physical action that the elders are to carry out. As the elders pray, they are to anoint the sick person in order to symbolize that the person is being set apart for God's special attention and care. Calvin, Luther, and other expositors think that the practice of anointing, along with the power to heal, was confined to the apostolic age. But such a temporal restriction cannot be established. James's recommend that the regular church officers carry out the practice would seem to imply its permanent validity in the church. On the other hand, the fact that anointing a sick person is mentioned only here in the NT epistles, and that many healings were accomplished without anointing, shows that the practice is not a necessary accompaniment to the prayer of healing.

*Hughes*: Rather than being medicinal or sacramental, the anointing is *symbolical*. Anointing in the Scriptures is usually associated with consecrating or setting apart someone for special service or attention. In this respect, oil is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who indwells and watches over each believer (cp. 4:5). So, the applying of oil to the sick is a rich symbolic act—setting the sick apart to be ministered to in a special way by the Holy Spirit. When applied by the loving hands of the elders, it is a profound vehicle for comfort and encouragement.

*Doriani*: The anointing is not a sacrament, but it can symbolize the power of the Holy Spirit. By this anointing, the church's leaders set apart the sick person for special attention, even healing, from God. This does not displace physicians, for all healing is spiritual. Wise physicians know they do not heal anyone.... Anointing is neither magical nor sacramental, but it is quasi-sacramental. Like other solemn ceremonies such as weddings or ordinations, the ceremony makes us pause so that we take the action seriously. The ceremony can arouse faith.

### (4) In the Name of the Lord (5:14e)

*...in the name of the Lord.*

*MacArthur*: The elder's ministry of intercession and restoration is to be done 'in the name of the Lord.' Any truly biblical encouragement must be consistent with who God is (which is what His name represents). To do something in the name of Christ is to do what He would have done in

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the situation; to pray in the name of Christ is to ask what He would want; to minister in the name of Christ is to serve others on His behalf (cp. Jn. 14:13-14).

### (5) And Let Them Pray Over Him (5:14c)

#### (a) *And Let Them Pray (5:14c)*

....and let them pray...

*Morgan:* Third, the elders are to pray. *Proseuchesthō*, is one of several terms in the New Testament for prayer. It means ‘to entreat, make intercession.’ It marks to central ministry the elders perform for the sufferer, and by no means is the sick person precluded from joining in the prayers on his behalf.... Elders, by definition in the biblical sense, are those who have the wisdom and the Christian maturity borne of many years in faithful service. The elders presumably have power in both prayer and discernment.... When they are led to pray, therefore, they have sense the purposes of God and will pray according with his will.

*Moo:* Elders were those spiritual leaders who were recognized for their maturity in the faith. Therefore, it is natural that they, with their deep and rich experience, should be called on to pray for healing. They should be able to discern the will of the Lord and to pray with the faith that recognizes and receives God’s gift of healing. At the same time, James makes clear that the church at large is to pray for healing (v. 16a). Therefore, while not denying that some in the church may have the gift of healing, James encourages all Christians, and especially those charged with pastoral oversight, to be active in prayer for healing.

*Dorani:* Sick men and women call the elders as a group. They do not call those with a gift for healing; rather they call all to pray for healing. James says the prayers of a righteous man are effective. Since the first qualification for an elder is holiness—not social standing or theological acumen—the prayers of elders are effective. The elders pray for *healing*, not for miracles. It doesn’t matter if a healing is quiet or splashy. True healings garner all the attention they need.

*Hughes:* This prayer—‘the prayer of faith’ (v. 15)—is the heart of it all.

#### (b) *Over Him (5:14c)*

...over him...

*Moo:* Since the elders are summoned to the sick person, we may assume that the sickness is serious enough to restrict the mobility of the sufferer. The same conclusion might be suggested by James’s use of the preposition *over* after the verb *pray*. Only here in biblical Greek does this combination occur, and it might picture the elders standing over the sick person. However, it might also be shorthand for laying hands on the person during the praying (see Mt. 19:13).

*Hughes:* The elders here are described as praying ‘over him,’ which seems to suggest a picture of the elders standing by the bed of the sick and extending their hands while praying.

*Dorani:* Notice that the sick person takes the initiative. He calls the elders, perhaps because he cannot travel. Further, the elders pray over him. This may signify that the sick man kneels. Or it may imply that a sick woman is bedridden. (Thus, the scene is not a healing service; that is something James neither commends nor forbids.)

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### (6) And the Prayer of Faith (5:15a)

<sup>15</sup>*And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*

*Moo:* Anointing with oil, because its significance is so unclear, attracts a lot of attention in this passage. But anointing, whatever it signifies, is clearly subordinate to James' main concern in these verses: prayer. James makes this intention clear by picking up in v. 14 the prayer of the elders from v. 14. As we noted, James uses the normal NT word for prayer of any kind in v. 14 (*proseuchomai*); now, however, he uses *euchē*, which occurs only twice elsewhere in the NT, where it means 'vow' (Acts 18:18; 21:23). Its cognate verb, however, refers to a fervent wish or petition in Acts 26:29; 27:29; Rom. 9:3. This prayer, James affirms, when offered *in faith, will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.*

*Morgan:* While a common word was used in verse 14 for prayer, here James switches to *euchē*, which occurs in only two other places in the New Testament (Acts 18:18; 21:23). It is a stronger term that denotes a fervent wish or petition.

*Dorani:* James 5:15-16 has both physical and spiritual healing in mind. We should seek more than a physical cure for more than physical problems. Physical healing is James's main concern, but we must look past the body. The ESV expresses it well. 'And the prayer of faith will *save* the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be *healed.*'

#### (a) Will Save the One Who Is Sick (5:15a)

*Moo:* The word for *make...well* in Greek is *sōzō*, which is usually translated 'save' and often refers to spiritual salvation in the NT (see all the other uses in James: 1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20)... The verb *sōzō* often refers to physical healing in the Gospels (cp. Mt. 9:21, 22; Mk. 3:4; 5:23; 28; 34; 6:56; 10:52; Lk. 7:50; 8:48, 50; 17:18; 18:42; Jn. 11:12); and *kamnō* (NIV *sick person*) refers to physical distress in four of its six LXX occurrences (4 Macc. 3:8; 7:13; Wis. 4:16; 15:9).

*Morgan:* In the immediate context in which James writes, we have three effects based on believing prayer. *First*, 'The prayer offered in faith will restore the sick one.' ... 'Will restore' translates *sōzō*, the New Testament word that means 'saved' and usually refers to spiritual salvation, but it can mean physical healing as well (see Mt. 9:21-22; Mk. 6:56). Any view that defaults to a *spiritual* restoration here is not in keeping with the context. A physical restoration here is the only responsible interpretation.

*Dorani:* The...term rendered 'save' ('make well' in the NIV) is the Greek verb *sōzō*. It can mean 'save' in the sense of saving the soul or in the sense of physical deliverance (e.g., Mt. 9:21-22; Mk. 6:56; Lk. 17:19)... This word (in both English and Greek) can mean 'save eternally,' from condemnation, or 'save temporally,' from illness or loss.

*MacArthur:* 'Sick' is misleading and not the best translation of *kamnō*, which in its only other New Testament usage (Heb. 12:3) clearly does not refer to physical illness. As has been noted, James speaks here of a spiritual restoration of weak, defeated believers. Nor does *sōzō* ('restore') necessarily refer to physical healing; it is most commonly translated 'save' in the New Testament. The idea here is that the elders' prayers will deliver weak, defeated believers from their spiritual weakness and 'restore' them to spiritual wholeness.

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### (b) *And the Lord Will Raise Him Up (5:15a)*

*Morgan:* Secondly, ‘and the Lord will raise him up.’ Although this statement elaborates on the physical healing, a new dimension is added. To be ‘raised up’ (*egerei*) indicates the completeness of the physical restoration. The result will be a *real* healing. James’ emphasis here is not on faith healers but on the power of God at work through the praying and believing Christian church.

*Moo:* Similarly, James’s promise that the Lord *will raise up* (*egeirō*) the sick person reflects the language of the NT healing stories (Mt. 9:6; Mk. 1:31; Acts 3:7). Thus, the picture is of the elders praying ‘over’ the sick person in his bed and the Lord intervening to *raise him up* from that bed.

*MacArthur:* Those prayers, of course, are but a channel for God’s power; it is the Lord who ‘will raise up’ the weak. *Egeirō* (‘raise up’) can also mean ‘to awaken’ or ‘to arouse.’ Through the righteous prayers of godly men, God will restore His battered sheep’s enthusiasm.

### (c) *Unconditional Promise? (5:15a)*

<sup>15</sup>*And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*

*MacArthur:* James’s note that ‘if’ one of the spiritually weak believers ‘has committed sins, they will be forgiven him’ provides further evidence that this passage does not refer to physical healing.

*Moo:* We must...ask about the apparently unconditional promise of healing that James issues here: *the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.* Some...avoid the problem by confining the power of healing to the apostolic age; but nothing in the text suggests any such restriction.

*Hughes:* As we turn from the prescription for healing to its result, what do we find? ... Unqualified healing—pure and simple—and in this lies the ‘problem.’ This verse would be so much easier if it read, ‘And the prayer offered in faith *may* make the sick person well; the Lord *may* raise him up.’ But that is not what it says. Rather, it presents healing as the guaranteed result of ‘the prayer offered in faith.’ It doesn’t mention the possibility of failure. This raises some tension for us because we all know some who have prayed but not been healed.

*Morgan:* This unqualified statement that the prayer of faith will restore the sick person to physical wholeness is quite problematic for many. Is this an unconditional guarantee that every sick person will be healed when this process is applied? Biblical evidence and personal experience demand that we answer no.

### (i) In God’s Timing

*Dorani:* James is not promising universal healing *in this life*. We already saw that the word ‘save’ can mean a physical or spiritual deliverance. The phrase ‘the Lord will raise him up’ (v. 15) also has two possible meanings. The Lord can raise the sick from their beds (Mt. 9:6; Acts 3:7). But in the New Testament, the Lord will ‘raise them up’ often refers to the resurrection on the last day (Jn. 6:40, 44, 54; 1 Cor. 15:15). The Lord raises up all the sick who believe in Him—some in this life, some for eternal life. The Lord will heal all His people sooner or later. Some rise from sickness in this life, after prayer by the elders. But others rise bodily only on the

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last day, when the Lord raises the dead. Since he determines when He heals, we should not blame sick believers for their lack of faith.

*Moo:* Others insist that the promise is infallibly answered, but in God's own timing. God may choose to heal in this age. But He will infallibly 'heal' all believers in the age to come, on the day when the body is transformed and illness will no longer be a threat. And the verb *egeirō*, ('raise up') might point in this direction, since it is regularly applied to resurrection in the NT. But this interpretation, though theologically appropriate, robs the present text of its real point. Believers who struggle with illness can, indeed, be confident that God will heal them in the end. But it does not require a special visit from the elders not an anointing with oil to accomplish that. It is, as it were, part of their salvation itself, guaranteed them as a gift of grace by the Lord. James plainly envisages a much more immediate result of this special time of prayer for the sick believer.

### (ii) Having Enough Faith

*Moo:* Certain preachers and writers make a great deal of this call for faith, insisting that a believer simply needs to have enough faith in order to receive healing from the Lord. The devastating result of this line of thinking is that believers who are not healed when they pray must deal with a twofold burden: added to their remaining physical challenge is the assumption that they lack sufficient faith. But this way of looking at faith and its results is profoundly unbiblical. And, in James at least, the prayer of faith that heals in v. 15 is offered not by the sufferer but by the elders (v. 14). Are the elders, therefore, at fault when their prayer for healing does not bring results in a reasonable amount of time? Would the healing have taken place if they had just believed enough?

*Dorani:* Other Christians claim that everyone can be healed, if he or she prays with enough faith. Conversely, if anyone is not healed, they can blame his or her lack of faith. This teaching doubles the misery for the chronically ill. They suffer their original problem, and they suffer the stigma of insufficient faith. This kind of thinking, which mars some charismatic and Pentecostal churches, makes several mistakes. First, it forgets that God numbers our days, that everyone must die. Therefore even the most faithful disciples suffer a final illness. No amount of faith will deliver them from it.

### (iii) Not All Healed in Scripture

*Dorani:* Second, Scripture notes that certain men of great faith were not healed of illnesses. Paul worked many miracles, but he did not heal associates such as Timothy (1 Tim. 5:23), Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20), and Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25). And the Lord never relieved Paul of his own 'thorn in the flesh,' which was apparently a physical affliction (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

*Moo:* And it is clear in the NT that God does *not* always will to heal the believer. Paul's own prayer for his healing offered three times, was not answered; God had a purpose in allowing the 'thorn in the flesh,' that 'messenger of Satan,' to remain (2 Cor. 12:7-9). Note also Titus 3:20, where Paul mentions that he 'left Trophimus sick in Miletus.'

*Dorani:* Taken in isolation, the statement 'the prayer of faith will save' seems to say that *all* who believe are healed, and *only* those who believe are healed. But Scripture's testimony is more complex. If God healed people because He saw their faith, then God should have healed Paul and his associates of all their illnesses. They had faith and were not healed; therefore we cannot

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ascribe lack of healing to lack of faith. Healing is a gift, not a reward. God does not *owe* healing to someone simply because she has strong faith.

### (d) *The Role of Faith (5:15a)*

<sup>15</sup>*And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.*

*Moo:* A more fruitful approach is to focus attention on the qualification that James introduces: it is only the prayer *offered in faith* that brings healing. James's language here again has a point of contact with the opening section of the letter, where he insisted that the believer who asks God for wisdom 'must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind' (1:6)... We can say this much. The faith exercised in prayer is faith in the God who sovereignly accomplishes His will. When we pray, our faith recognizes, explicitly or implicitly, the overruling providential purposes of God. We may at times be given insight into that will, enabling us to pray with absolute confidence in God's plan to answer as we ask. But surely these cases are rare – more rare even than our subjective, emotional desires would lead us to suspect. A prayer for healing, then, must usually be qualified by a recognition that God's will in the matter is supreme.

*Hughes:* The understanding of verse 15 depends on the definition of 'the prayer of faith.' What are we to understand about this healing prayer? First, the prayer of faith comes from a faith in Almighty God who sovereignly carries out His will. Nothing is beyond Him. He can heal anyone anytime He wills, and *He does heal today!* He does as He will in every circumstance, working all things to His glory. Secondly, the prayer of faith carries a Spirit-given conviction that the Lord will indeed heal the person who is being prayed for. We are truly able to pray the prayer of faith only when we are sure it is God's will (see 1 Jn. 5:14; Mt. 18:19-20)... From this we understand that the prayer of faith is not something we can manufacture.... *It is a gift from God....* James is saying that when the elders have the Spirit-wrought conviction that the Lord will heal the one being prayed for, they will pray the prayer of faith and the sick will be healed. Not only that, but 'if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven' (v. 15b). That is, if the illness was due to personal sin, the healing will also signify that his or her sins are forgiven.

*Moo:* The faith with which we pray is always faith in the God whose will is supreme and best; only sometimes does this faith include assurance that a particular request is within that will. This is exactly the qualification that is needed to understand Jesus' own promise: 'You make ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it' (Jn. 14:14). To ask 'in Jesus' name' means not simply to utter His name, but to take into account His will. Only those requests offered 'in that will' are granted. Prayer for healing offered in the confidence that God will answer that prayer *does* bring healing; but only when it is God's will to heal, will that faith, itself a gift of God, be present.

*Morgan:* The crux is on the 'prayer of faith,' and it may well be that James and the elders know, from diligently seeking the heart of God, that He intends to heal this particular malady when the person exercises faith and calls for the elders.... We must always pray 'Thy will be done,' and apparently James and the church leaders had the sense that God's will *in this case* was to heal the affliction.

*Dorani:* Jesus teaches us to pray, 'Your will be done' (Mt. 6:10; cp. James 4:15). The Lord grants or denies our requests as He wills. His sovereign purposes direct His actions. He has mercy as He wills (Rom. 9:18). It is a mistake to congratulate ourselves for strong faith when God grants a request and a mistake to blame ourselves when He refuses one.

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### (7) And If He Has Committed Sins, He Will Be Forgiven (5:15b)

*And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.*

*Morgan:* The *third* effect is, ‘If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.’ James states the case conditionally (‘if’), showing that sin *can* be an element in physical sickness, but not necessarily so.... The point is that the Lord who heals is also the One who forgives. And, for those who need it, the healing does not stop with the body (the fruit) but extends also to the soul (the root).

*MacArthur:* The Bible nowhere teaches that all sickness is the direct result of an individual’s sins. Spiritual defeat, however, is often both the cause and result of sin. When that is the case the antidote is to confess those sins to God and obtain forgiveness.... If sin has contributed to or resulted from the spiritual weakness and defeat of a fallen believer, that sin ‘will be forgiven him’ when he cries out to God for forgiveness. The elders can encourage him to confess, help him discern his sins, and join their prayers for his forgiveness to his. That is an essential element of their ministry of restoration.

*Moo:* To be sure, the last half of v. 15 might be cited as evidence that a spiritual interpretation is on the right track after all. Why else would James say that *if he [the sick person] has sinned, he will be forgiven?* In fact, however, the language reinforces the physical healing interpretation that we have been advocating. For sin and sickness were often closely associated in the ancient world. Certainly the book of Job, as well as Jesus (cp. Jn. 9:2-3), makes it clear that drawing a direct relationship between illness and sin is impossible to do. But the NT continues to recognize that some illnesses are, in fact, the product of sin (Mk. 2:1-12; 1 Cor. 5:5 [?]; 11:27-30). Recognizing this possible connection, James encourages the sick person to deal with any potential spiritual causes of the illness that he is experiencing. The ‘if’ (*kan*) is therefore doubly important; it shows that James by no means assumes that sickness is caused by sin; and it makes a spiritual interpretation of the passage difficult, since it is difficult to imagine a condition of spiritual ‘weakness’ that would not be a product of sin.

*Doriani:* This reminds us that healing has a spiritual dimension. We should confess our sins because sin can lead to illness. This idea sounds antiquated, even offensive, but Scripture does draw a connection between sin and sickness. In Jesus’ day, people *overspiritualized* illness. Many assumed that all tragedy and disease were direct consequences of sin. Today, in the West, we *despiritualize* illness. We believe microbes and defective genes cause all illness. We deny a link between sin and illness except in obvious cases such as cirrhosis of the liver and sexually transmitted diseases. In fact, we need to *respiritualize* illness, for Scripture often links sin and illness (cp. Lk. 5:20; Jn. 5:14; 1 Cor. 11:30; Acts 12:23; Pr. 3:28-35; 13:13-23; Dt. 28:58-63; Ez. 18:1-29)... Nevertheless, other passages deny that all illness is the result of personal sin (Job 9:13-21; 29:1-30:31; Eccl. 3:16-22; 5:12-17; 6:1-9; Jn. 9:2-3).

*Hughes:* James is not saying one’s sickness is necessarily a result of sin (cp. Jn. 9:3)... Similarly, ‘the steadfastness of Job,’ mentioned previously in 5:11, was severely tested by his friends who *wrongly* kept insisting that he was ill due to his sin. On the other hand, James is in agreement with other New Testament teaching that sometimes associates illness and even death with one’s sin (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:27-32; Mk. 2:5; Jn. 5:14)... Therefore, before one calls for the healing ministry he must, as best he can, examine his life for any known sin and humbly confess it to God (cp. Ps. 66:18; 139:23, 24; Pr. 28:13). In this respect, the miseries of illness can open avenues of grace as they help clear away the traffic that has stalled its flow.

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*Doriani:* James urges us to consider the *possibility* that the sick person has sinned. ‘If he has sinned,’ James says, he can be forgiven. Sin may or may not be the root of an illness, but our time in bed gives us an opportunity for self-examination. When sickness idles us, we should use our solitude to scan our lives. If sins come to mind, we should confess them, repent, and endeavor to reform. In Psalm 32, David says sin can wound the whole person, body and soul (vv. 3-5)... To some extent, then, spiritual health engenders physical health, and spiritual troubles beget physical sorrows... Since sin causes some illnesses, and since physical healing through prayer remains James’s primary concern, he urges confession.

### (8) Summary

*Hughes:* In accordance with Biblical teaching we affirm that God sovereignly heals *some* of His children from disease. We also affirm that God is not limited as to the means or instruments He chooses to use in bringing healing. This said, we believe that the normal Scriptural pattern for healing involves calling for the elders of the church to anoint and pray over the ill for healing as described in James 5:13-16... This teaching, understood in its context, places the human initiative on the ill and presupposes a life in fellowship with Christ, the confession of known sins, and the inner urging of the Holy Spirit (divine initiative to call for prayer by the elders).

*Morgan:* There is a special benefit for the sick person in this spiritual exercise even if physical healing proves not to be God’s will. When we are unwell, it is extremely difficult to pray for ourselves with objectivity because we naturally want to be restored to health. Our spiritual undershepherds are in a much better position to pray for us with discernment. In addition when we are ailing we may find it almost impossible to pray at all. And here others may help us. As the elders pray with him, the sufferer is able to rest in the knowledge that through corporate prayer his circumstances are placed under God’s control afresh, and if physical healing is not God’s will, he may be sure of the spiritual healing he needs and the daily renewal of God’s grace and peace. This passage, then, does not provide a blanket guarantee that all physical sickness will be healed in this life. It assumes that God will disclose His will, and the prayer of faith asks in accordance with that purpose. Trouble, happiness, illness, and sin – none of us knows when we may have to face these ordinary, everyday human experiences. But when we do, our faith must be put to work whether in prayer, praise, or confession of sin.

## 2. Confession and Prayer (5:16ab)

### (1) Therefore...That You May Be Healed (5:16ab)

<sup>16</sup>*Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.*

*Moo:* The *therefore* [oun] shows that the exhortation to mutual confession and prayer in this verse is the conclusion that the readers are to draw from the discussion of prayer in vv. 13-15. Verse 16 might function in at least two different ways in relation to vv. 14-15. First, by understanding the purpose statement *that you may be healed* in a spiritual sense or in a combined spiritual/physical sense, we could view v. 16 as a generalization from the encouragement to pray for healing in vv. 14-15. Since the prayer for healing offered in faith accomplishes so much (v. 15a) and since God is anxious to forgive the sins of His people (v. 15b), the whole community should be encouraged to confess their sins to one another and to pray for one another. By so doing the health (in the broadest sense) of the community will be insured. Second, if we take *that you may be healed* in a physical sense, then v. 16 will conclude James’s specific discussion about prayer for healing. Both confession of sins – precisely because sin can sometimes be

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responsible for illness – and prayer are necessary so that the healing of physical illnesses in the community can take place. This last interpretation, typing v. 16 closely to the discussion of physical healing in vv. 14-15, is probably best.

*MacArthur*: ‘Therefore’ marks a transition in the flow of thought. Turning his attention from the sins of those believers who have been defeated in the spiritual battle, James addressed the congregation as a whole... The purpose for the mutual prayer that James called for is that believers may ‘be healed.’ *iaomai* (‘healed’) does not necessarily refer to physical healing. In Matthew 13:15 it symbolized God’s withheld forgiveness of Israel’s sins (cp. Jn. 12:40; Acts 28:27). The writer of Hebrews also used it metaphorically to speak of spiritual restoration (Heb. 12:12-13), while Peter used it to describe the healing from sin Christ purchased for believers on the cross (1 Pe. 2:24). James uses it to refer to God’s forgiveness, making the repentant believer spiritually whole again.

*Moo*: For the verb *heal* (*iaomai*) is consistently applied to physical afflictions. To be sure, it is used in the Septuagint to describe the ‘healing’ of sin or faithlessness (cp. Dt. 30:3; Is. 6:10; 52:5; Jer. 3:22). But in these contexts it is usually the case that sin has already been explicitly compared to a ‘wound,’ establishing a metaphorical ‘word game.’ In the NT *iaomai* is used in a spiritual sense only in quotations from these OT texts. When used independently, as here, it always is applied to a physical malady (Mt. 8:8, 13; 15:28; Mk. 5:29; Lk. 5:17; 6:18, 19; 7:7; 8:47; 9:2, 11, 42; 14:4; 17:15; 22:51; Jn. 4:47; 5:13; 12:40; Acts 9:34; 19:38; 28:8; the only exception is Heb. 12:13, where sin has already been compared to a sickness).

*Morgan*: ‘So that you may be healed’ is a very clear purpose clause with the verb *iaomai*. It is a versatile word used in the New Testament for spiritual restoration (Jn. 12:40; Acts 28:27; Heb. 12:12-13), but we must acknowledge that it can point to physical healing as well (and this is the only sense that would be consistent with ‘restore’ and ‘raise up’ in verse 15). Some writers wish to discard any possible meaning here for a literal and physical healing. But James seems too deliberate in emphasizing a physical restoration.

*Dorani*: The word ‘healed’ signifies physical healing. Therefore, we should pray for one another, for healing. Some Christians grow weary of praying about physical ailments. They want to pray for ‘more important things.’ That is understandable, but it is still fitting to ask God to heal the body.

*Hughes*: This is generally understood to be a broad directive for enhancing the physical well-being of the congregation because the immediately preceding context gives a prescription for physical healing. It is indeed that—in part. Mutual confession of sin and resulting prayer truly does elevate the health of God’s people. But confession and prayer also has a broader application that includes *spiritual* health because the verse under discussion is closely connected with verses 17-18, which have to do with the general power of prayer in the life of the righteous. In this respect, the word ‘healed’ can refer to the figurative healing of diseases of the soul, as it does in several New Testament references (cp. Mt. 13:15; Jn. 12:40; Heb. 12:13; 1 Pe. 2:24). *There is healing power in mutual confession and mutual prayer.*

### (2) Confess Your Sins to One Another (5:16a)

<sup>16</sup>*Therefore, confess your sins to one another...*

*Moo*: On this reading of v. 16, James’s encouragement to the community to *confess your sins to each other* will have particular reference to those sins that might be hindering physical healing.

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*Confess* translates a Greek verb (*exomologeō*) that means basically, ‘agree with’ (see Lk. 22:6), but in the NT usually refers to a verbal acknowledgement of God’s greatness (Mt. 11:25; Mk. 1:5; Acts 19:18). (The simple form of the verb *homologeō* has a similar range of usage). This is the only verse in the NT that explicitly commands believers to confess their sins to one another, and it became the basis for the ‘rule’ for small meetings in the eighteenth-century ‘Methodist’ movement., But how broadly are we to take this command? James might be requiring only that we confess our sin to those whom we have harmed by the particular sin (cp. Mt. 5:25-26). But the context of healing that we think carries over into v. 16 suggests rather that James thinks of sins that may have caused the illness for which prayers are being offered.

*Doriani*: It is easy to misunderstand the command to confess sins to one another. James cannot intend meetings where people confess any and every sin to each other. This is the only Bible verse that says, ‘Confess your sins to each other,’ so the rest of Scripture must guide our thinking. Here are some salient principles. 1) The offender confesses to the one offended, whether to a human or to God. 2) We confess secret sins to God, since sins such as anger, envy, or lust offend Him, even if they never lead to action. It is highly unlikely that we will accomplish anything constructive by telling someone, ‘I envied you,’ or ‘I lusted after you.’ 3) We confess private sins privately to the one or the few we offended. We confess public sins (which offend many) publicly.

*Doriani*: The confession James recommends must fit category three. Once a sick and sinning believer repents, fellowship is restored (James assumes that the offended party will be ready to forgive). Then the whole body of Christ can pray effectively for healing.... Elders are responsible to set an example of personal righteousness, yet James 5:16 expects the whole church to pray. Every saint—everyone who is righteous by faith—prays. Still, the efficacy of a prayer lies in the grace and power of God, not the goodness and merit of the petitioner.

*Morgan*: A spirit of openness should prevail in the church that encourages the confession of failures and faults. The author calls for a confession of specific sins, not just personal sinfulness.

*MacArthur*: James addressed the congregation as a whole, exhorting believers to continually ‘confess’ their ‘sins to one another’ and not wait until those sins dragged them into the depths of utter spiritual defeat.... Sin seeks to remain private and secret, but God wants it exposed and dealt with in the loving fellowship of other believers. Therefore, James called for mutual honesty and mutual confession as believers ‘pray for one another.’

*Hughes*: Regarding confession, the essential, primary, and continual confession of all Christian souls must be to God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.... No human being can forgive another’s sin. Absolution is in the hands of Christ alone. Thus, there is no basis here for the institution of confession to a priest or other religious leader or forgiveness by them. Notice that the confession is *mutual*—‘to one another,’ which also effectively rules out confessing to an elite priesthood. Having said this, there is a place for Spirit-directed mutual confession between believers.... Mutual confession enhances mutual prayer and makes it possible the bearing of one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:1-2). We must also mention the value of spiritual accountability, which always follows the confession of one’s sins to a mature brother or sister. How much sorrow would be avoided if this were commonly practiced today by both clergy and laity!

### (3) And Pray for One Another (5:16b)

*...and pray for one another that you may be healed.*

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*Moo:* We should note an important shift in emphasis in the passage: in v. 14 the elders are encouraged to pray for healing; now, however, the whole church body is to prayer.... James's shift from elders to believers in general reminds us again that the power to heal is invested in prayer, not the elder. And while it is appropriate that those charged with the spiritual oversight of the community should be called to intercede for the seriously ill, James makes clear that *all* believers have the privilege and responsibility to pray for healing.

*Morgan:* The same Spirit that encourages confessions also promotes prayer – the kind of prayer that lays bare the heart and soul before the Lord. Mutual confession stimulates and gives direction to mutual intercession.

*Hughes:* In verse 16 James carries his thought a bit further.... James consciously generalizes, making the specific case of 5:14-15 into a general principle of preventative medicine. Prayer for each other brings spiritual and physical healing to the church.

### 3. Principle of Prayer (5:16c)

*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

*Morgan:* The central principle of this passage is that God answers the prayers of His people when they are offered in faith and in accordance with His will: 'The effectual prayer of a righteous man [has] much power.' 'Effectual' translates *energoumenh* (we derive our word *energy* from it), a participle modifying 'prayer' that means 'having much energy, able to work....' 'Righteous' signifies a person who is in right standing with God through Christ and who displays that through a life of faith. This is borne out in the example of Elijah (5:17), 'who had a nature like ours.' The energetic prayers of a righteous man are a potent force in calling down the power of God for physical healing and spiritual restoration. Typical of James, whenever someone is healed it is because it is God's will, and through prayers of faith believers may be involved in that process and God's movements throughout our world.

*Moo:* Verse 16 concludes with a reminder of the great power of prayer, providing a fitting capstone to the exhortations to pray in vv. 13-16a. The *righteous man*, or 'person' (the Greek masculine form *dikaiou* is clearly generic), is simply the believer, the person who is 'righteous' by virtue of receiving forgiveness through Jesus and is therefore part of the people of God. Prayer, James wants to make clear, is a powerful weapon in the hands even of the humblest believer; it does not require a 'super saint' to wield it effectively. James employs yet a third Greek word for *prayer* here (*deēsis*), one that appropriately focuses attention on the petitionary aspect of prayer..... The NIV's *powerful and effective* translates the combination of adverb, verb, and participle in Greek: 'is powerful to a great degree...being effective.' The form of the participle (*energoumenē*) is ambiguous. It could be passive, in which case we could translate 'prayer is very powerful when it is energized (by God or the Spirit).' On this view, James would subtly introduce a qualification to the effectiveness of prayer: only when God 'energizes' the prayer as it is offered in accordance with His will will it be effective. However, as theologically attractive as this interpretation might be, it probably reads too much into the text. The participle is probably a middle, with the sense 'as it powerfully works' (as most English translations interpret).

*MacArthur:* By way of encouraging both elders and Christians to this kind of intercession for those in spiritual weakness, James reminds them that such prayer is 'effective.' 'Effective' translates *energeō*, from which our English word 'enemy' derives. The prayer of a 'righteous

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man’ (cp. 4:3; Ps. 66:18; Pr. 15:8; 28:9), James notes, ‘can accomplish much’ (literally ‘is very strong’). Weak prayers come from weak people; strong prayers come from strong people. The energetic prayers of a righteous man are a potent force in calling down the power of God for restoring weak, struggling believers to spiritual health.

*Hughes:* The joyous axiom here is: ‘The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.’ Notice that he didn’t say, ‘the prayer of the spiritual elite,’ but rather mentions a righteous Christian who has the imputed righteousness of Christ and lives an ethically righteous life. The prayer of a godly Christian is very powerful in the way it works. May we exercise our power daily!

*Hughes:* The message is clear to all us: ‘The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working’—or as some scholars think it is better translated, ‘The prayer of a righteous man is of great power when energized,’ the energizer being the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit energizes the prayer, the one praying is energized so that He passionately throws His energy into it—which is precisely what Elijah’s example illustrates. Therefore, if one is ‘righteous,’ having confessed all known sin, being energized by the Holy Spirit to pray passionately, there will be great power.

### 4. Example of Prayer (5:17-18)

*Morgan:* This section on prayer ends with an example of the principle just stated, which James cites through two patriarchal heroes – Job models the patient endurance of present trials and Elijah models the prayerful attitude we should maintain in the face of trials.

#### a) *Elijah’s Nature (5:17a)*

<sup>17</sup>*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours...*

#### (1) Elijah’s Fame

*Moo:* James caps off his encouragement to pray (vv. 13-16) with an example of a ‘righteous man’ whose prayer was ‘powerful and effective’: Elijah. Elijah, whose exploits were so spectacular and ‘translation’ into the presence of the Lord so remarkable, was one of the most popular of all figures among Jews. He was celebrated for his powerful miracles and his prophetic denunciations of sin. Most of all, however, he was looked for as the helper in time of need, whose coming would pave the way for the Messianic age (Mal. 4:5-6; Mk. 9:12; Lk. 1:17).

*Hughes:* James calls up the example of the prophet Elijah. Many feel that Elijah was ‘the greatest and most romantic character that Israel ever produced.’ ... Elijah’s name was...connected with paving the way for the coming Messiah (Mal. 4:5-6; Mk. 9:12; Lk. 1:17). Elijah was so highly regarded that some were tempted to think he was superhuman, and some therefore could conceivably wonder how his example of powerful prayer could apply to them.

#### (2) Elijah’s Humanity

*Hughes:* Thus, James introduces him by saying, ‘Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.’ He had the same human nature, the same fallible passions as us. He was an ordinary mortal (cp. Acts 14:15, which uses the same word). Therefore, Elijah’s experience has lessons for all of us.

*Moo:* But it is not Elijah’s special prophetic endowment or unique place in history that interests James, but the fact that he was *a man just like us* (Gk. *homoiothēs*; cp. Acts 14:15). As in v. 16b, James emphasizes that every believer has access to the kind of effectiveness in prayer that he is illustrating here.

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*MacArthur:* To further demonstrate the power of righteous prayer and provide an illustration that captures the essence of his discussion James turns to one of the most popular Old Testament figures. Elijah, he reminds his readers, though a prophet and man of God, ‘was a man with a nature like ours.’ The Bible records that he was hungry (1 Kgs. 17:11), afraid (1 Kgs. 19:3), and depressed (1 Kgs. 19:3, 9-14).

*Morgan:* Knowing the stories of the mighty Elijah from 1 Kings in the Old Testament, we might put aside his example because he was such an exceptional servant of God. But James reminds us, he ‘was a man with a nature like ours.’ The Bible records that he suffered the same human weaknesses that we do: he became hungry (1 Kgs. 17:11), afraid (1 Kgs. 19:3), and depressed (1 Kgs. 19:9-14). Two important parallels emerge with this illustration. *First*, Elijah was a normal human being. And, being every bit as human as we are, Elijah ‘prayed earnestly.’

*Dorani:* *Elijah* illustrates how effective the prayer of the righteous can be... Elijah illustrates effective prayer in important ways. First, Elijah was a righteous and faithful man, yet he certainly was not a perfect man. At times, he so indulged his fears that he ran away, despaired of life, and petitioned God to take him (1 Kgs. 19:1-11). Still, God heard his prayers, whether for drought or for rain. Second, notice that James does not call Elijah a prophet, does not emphasize his special relationship with God. He calls Elijah a man ‘just like us’ (NIV). He had the same ‘nature’ (ESV) or ‘passions’ (KJV) as the rest of us. Like us, he served from a position of weakness. He felt the world’s powers arrayed against him. He was prone to despair. He was not worthy, he was simply a righteous man who prayed, for his individuals and for his society.

### *b) Elijah’s Prayers (5:17b-18)*

*...and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. <sup>18</sup>Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*

*Moo:* ‘Prayed earnestly’ is a good translation of the Semitic cognate construction, which literally rendered would read ‘prayer with prayer.’ The situation James describes is recorded in 1 Kings 17-18. God had proclaimed through Elijah that a drought would afflict the land as a means of punishing Ahab and Israel for their idolatry. Although the OT does not state that Elijah prayed for the drought 1 Kgs. 18:42 does picture him praying for the drought to end, and it is a legitimate inference to think that he prayed for its onset also. Similarly, we should probably take the three and a half years specified by James (cp. also Lk. 4:25) as a more specific figure for the rounded off ‘three years’ in 1 Kgs. 18L:1. Perhaps the figure ‘three and a half’ was suggested by its symbolic associations with a period of judgment (Dan. 7:25; cp. Rev. 11:12; 12:14).

*MacArthur:* Yet, when ‘he prayed earnestly’ (lit., ‘he prayed with prayer’), incredible things happened... Elijah’s prayers both created and ended a devastating three-and-one-half drought (cp. Lk. 4:25). While 1 Kings 17 records the drought, only James gives its duration and links it to the prayers of Elijah.

*Morgan:* Elijah ‘prayed earnestly.’ Literally, the Greek text reads, ‘he prayed with prayer.’ *Second*, the situation resembles the one faced by James’s readers. Just as the sick person is dry and lifeless, so the days in which Elijah ministered were just the same. The Old Testament never associates Elijah’s prayer life with the incident reported here (‘that it might not rain...for three years and six months’). Likewise, the Old Testament does not tell us that the drought lasted for three and one-half years. We do know from 1 Kings 18:42 that he prayed for the drought to cease. Jewish tradition, however, includes ample evidence of these events, and James accepts them as correct.

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*MacArthur:* The story of Elijah and the drought would certainly be a strange illustration if James had physical illness and healing in view throughout this passage. Certainly there are numerous clear biblical illustrations of healing he could have drawn from. But the picture of rain pouring down on parched ground perfectly illustrates God's outpouring of spiritual blessings on the dry and parched souls of struggling believers. And He does both in response to the righteous prayers of godly people.

*Hughes:* What do we learn from Elijah? *Passionate prayer....* Interestingly, the account of this miracle in 1 Kings 17, 18 nowhere mentions that that Elijah prayed for the drought to begin, though James here says that 'he prayed fervently.' How did James know about such a prayer. Possibly because of extra-Biblical literature such as Ecclesiasticus 48:1-3, so that James, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, authenticated the historical record. 'He prayed fervently that it might not rain' is literally 'in prayer he prayed,' a Hebrew idiom for intensity or passion. Elijah's prayer was not a laid-back request—'God, it would be nice if it would not rain.' Rather, he passionately poured out his heart to Heaven. Apparently (cp. 1 Kgs. 17:1) God had told him a drought was coming, so he prayed with all he had that God's word would transpire. And it did, with a terrible three and a half years of famine. And when God revealed to his prophet that it was time for the drought to end, saying, 'Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth' (1 Kgs. 18:1), there was again passionate prayer (1 Kgs. 18:42-45).

*Moo:* A broader question is why James has chosen this particular illustration of effective prayer. As we have noted, the OT does not even mention the prayer, while several other outstanding illustrations of the power of the prayer from the life of Elijah are close to hand: calling down fire to consume the sacrifice on Mount Carmel or raising to life the son of the widow (see Lk. 4:25). One explanation for the unusual choice might be that James intends us to see an analogy between the sickness of a believer restored to health and the deadness of the land brought back to life and fruitfulness. But the parallels are not very obvious, and James does nothing to draw attention to what similarities do exist. Probably, then, James at least partly relies on Jewish tradition, where there is evidence for an association between the drought and Elijah's praying (Sir. 48:2-3; 2 Esdr. 7:109).

### c) *Elijah's Example*

*Dorani:* We can pray just like Elijah. We may feel weak and lonely. We may feel powers against us. In prayer, we may admit that we fear those powers, yet our prayers also declare that the greatest powers are unseen. The power of God heals disease and changes the world.

*Hughes:* *God sovereignly delights to answer the passionate prayers of His children.* This is not to suggest that He delights in manufactured passion, nor that passion is a meritorious work. Nor are we suggesting that sweaty, frantic prayer is necessarily pleasing to God. But real passion, however it is expressed through the medium of one's personality, is a part of prayer that God is pleased to answer.

*Morgan:* From Elijah we learn that half-hearted praying is an insult to God. If we truly believe that God is omnipotent, that He is the 'God of all flesh for whom nothing is too difficult,' then we should pray with absolute confidence in His ability to perform what we ask. And, if we have truly yielded our will to His in our requests, there is no room for half-hearted praying. Elijah prayed with fervent passion for a drought and he received it; he prayed for rain and God sent it.

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*Hughes:* The...great duty of the church is to engage in powerful prayer, which comes through *purity* and *passion*. The prayer of a pure, righteous man or woman of God is powerful, and when it is prayed with passion from God, it is Elijah-powerful!

### B. Seeking Spiritual Restoration (James 5:19-20)

*Moo:* James does not conclude his letter with greetings and benedictions typical of epistolary endings but with a summons to action. This kind of ending is more typical of the moral ‘formal’ NT letters that read like published sermons. 1 John is an especially close parallel. James letter has been full of specific rebukes and commands. Indeed...there are more imperative verbs per word in James than in any other NT book. So it is fitting that he would in the end turn to the community with an encouragement to intervene on behalf of fellow Christians who may be having difficulty with the spiritual matters that James has been discussing.

*Morgan:* The epistle concludes with an admonition to rescue those who are straying from the truth... Absent from James’ conclusion are the customary greetings, benedictions, and personal remarks so common to most New Testament epistles... This may indicate James’ intended use of the letter as more of a formal sermon. First John ends with a similar pastoral directive (1 Jn. 5:21).

*MacArthur:* These two verses form a fitting conclusion to the book of James. They express James’s primary objective in writing his epistle: to confront those in the assembly of believers who possessed false, dead faith... The epistle does have an evangelistic emphasis, but one that is mainly directly toward professing believers in the church. James wrote, as did John in his first epistle, to call professed believers to examine their faith and make sure it is real. He was deeply concerned that no one be deceived about his salvation.

*Dorani:* The last verses of James seem to initiate a new topic. But on closer inspection, they develop previous themes... If the family of God prays together when physical illness wounds a member, they should certainly work together if spiritual troubles threaten... Technically, James makes a promise: if someone restores someone who wanders from the truth, he ‘will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.’ More broadly, James tells us what to do if someone strays from the truth.

*Hughes:* From the beginning, James has been concerned that people within the visible confessing church have true faith. Faith, according to James, produces works that affect how one spends his money, how he relates to the poor and to the world, and so much more. Faith shows itself in the use of the whole body, especially the tongue. Aberrations in any of these areas may indicate a bogus faith and the danger of apostasy. His call to keep our brothers and sisters on track is a fitting conclusion to his great letter.

#### 1. Exhortation for Intervention (5:19-20a)

##### a) *Wanderers from the Truth (5:19a)*

<sup>19</sup>*My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth...*

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### (1) Brothers (5:19a)

*Moo:* For the last time James uses his favorite address, *brothers* (e.g., fellow members of the family of God, both male and female). But he does not here, as he has so often, call on his fellow believers to bring themselves into obedience to the gospel requirements.

*MacArthur:* James uses the phrase ‘my brethren’ (or brethren) in a general sense throughout his epistle.... Here, as in 2:1, (where it also stands first in the sentence), the phrase ‘my brethren’ refers to genuine believers and, as in 2:1, marks a sharp break in the flow of thought. There is no connecting link with the previous section (5:13-18); rather James is now turning to a new and final concluding thought. The concluding two verses describe a different group from the wear, weak, persecuted believers who need to be ministered to by the elders. To the ministry of restoring struggling believers James adds the ministry of reconciling the unsaved in the church. The phrase ‘if any among you’ also introduces this third category of people. In verse 13, this phrase described suffering Christians who needed to pray; in verse 14 it described weak, defeated Christians who needed the care of the elders. Here it describes professed believers who need to be called to true salvation by the rest of the fellowship. Sadly, such people are to be found in every church; Jesus promised as much in Matthew 13:20-23, 24-30, 37-43, 47-50. ‘Among you’ indicates they are in the believing church, professing salvation.... Even Jesus had His Judas and Paul his Demas. Such people emerge last in James’s list because they have the greatest need and, as will be seen below, are in the gravest of all danger.

*Dorani:* That ‘someone’ may or may not be a member of the visible Christian community. The phrasing—‘My brothers if *one of you* should wander’—inclines us to think of fellow believers, but James also had unbelievers in sight. Some had a vain faith (2:14-26); some had no faith at all (5:1-6). James says that when we see anyone stray, we should try to restore him.

*Morgan:* James may have had specific individuals in mind. Commentators disagree concerning the identity of those who wander – are they fellow believers who have fallen by the wayside, or are they unregenerate and still in their sin? The wisest approach is to see these wanderers as a part of the church, though the genuineness of their salvation is yet to be proven.... The indefinite pronoun ‘anyone’ (*tis*) emphasizes the danger that this could happen to any believer. The indefiniteness is compounded by the use of the pronoun again for the one who ‘turns back’ the straying brother or sister. Unlike the ministry of the elders to the sick in verse 14, this ministry of restoration applies to any and all members of the community.

### (2) Wanders (5:19a)

*Moo:* The language of ‘wandering’ that James uses here might suggest that he is thinking only of inadvertent or casual sins. But the Gk. *planaō* that we have here often refers to any deviation from the truth of the faith, whether inadvertent or intentional, minor or major. And, since James suggests in v. 20 that the ‘wandering’ Christian is saved from spiritual death, the deviation from the faith here must be a very serious one, tantamount to apostasy.

*Morgan:* ‘Wanders’ or strays (*planaō*) may be passive or middle voice. If passive, it suggests the individual is being led away from the truth; if middle, the idea is that the person carelessly went off on his own.

*MacArthur:* The Greek grammatical structure of the phrase ‘if any among you strays from the truth’ indicates it is a possibility likely to happen.’ ‘Strays’ is from *planaō*, which means ‘to wander,’ ‘to go astray,’ ‘to apostatize.’ It is used to describe physical wandering, both in the

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Septuagint (e.g., Gen. 37:15; Ex. 14:3; 23:4; Dt. 22:1; 27:18; Job 38:41) and in the New Testament (e.g., Mt. 18:12-13; Heb. 11:38). But it is often used of straying from spiritual truth, both in the Septuagint (e.g., Dt. 11:28; 30:17; Pr. 14:22; Is. 9:16; Ez. 14:11), and in the New Testament (e.g., Lk. 21:8| Heb. 3:10; 2 Pe. 2:15).

*Hughes:* James graphically presents apostasy as a very real possibility in the opening phrase of verse 19.... The Greek word for ‘wanders’ is *planaō*, from which we derive the word ‘planet,’ a heavenly wanderer. James sees some believers as potentially cut loose from the church and wandering alone across a desolation. But he does not see this wandering as unconscious or absent-minded. Moreover, this is not simply a doctrinal wandering from the truth, but a wandering in lifestyle. The Hebrew mind, and especially that of James, never separated the *intellectual* from the *behavioral*, or the *doctrinal* from the *moral*, as the Greeks did. Truth was something people *did* (Jn. 3:21, NASB).

### (3) Truth (5:19a)

*Moo:* Rather, he encourages them to *bring back* any person among them who might have ‘wandered from the truth.’ *The truth* does not refer here to Christian doctrine in the narrow sense, but more broadly to all that is involved in the gospel. This truth is something that is to be done as well as believed (cp. Ps. 51:6; Gal.; 5:7; 1 Jn. 1:6). And for James, of course, correct doctrine cannot be separated from correct behavior. What the mind thinks, and the mouth confesses, the body must do – anything less is worldly, sinful ‘doublemindedness’ (1:8; 4:8).

*MacArthur:* The ‘truth’ refers to the Word of God, primarily the gospel of salvation (cp. 1:18; 3:14). It is a sure mark of those whose faith is not genuine that they reject the ‘truth’ of salvation and fall away doctrinally from ‘the faith which once for all handed down to the saints’ (Jude 3).

*Doriani:* The concept of wandering ‘from the truth’ implies that James assumes there is objective truth ‘out there,’ apart from the knower.... The Christian says there is a way of truth that leads to life and there is a way of error that leads to death. Without restoration, the sinner is alienated from the church and lost to God.

*Hughes:* Thus, apostasy could be discerned in two ways: doctrinal aberration or moral deviation. In fact, the Bible teaches that a moral deviation can, and often does, affect one’s doctrine. Thousands today change what they believe to accommodate their moral behavior. On the other hand, thousands more take up false doctrine, then apostatize in their actions.... As Christians who care for the church, we ought to be sensitive to moral changes in our own behavior and (while avoiding judgmentalism) be sensitive to changes in our brothers and sisters. In our day moral wandering may be as sure an indication of apostasy as mental theological wandering.

### b) *Brings Him Back* (5:19b-20a)

...and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup>let him know that whoever brings back...

*Hughes:* James’s great concern is not just that we are able to discern apostasy, but that we do something about it.... This is *spiritual reclamation*.

*Moo:* ‘Bring back’ (*epistrepḗō*) can refer to a person’s initial ‘turn’ from sin to God in conversion (Acts 14:15; 15:19; 26:18; 1 Th. 1:9). Here, however, James specifically refers to one of *you*, that is, a person who has a least outwardly identified with the Christian community. ‘Bring back’ will mean, therefore, turning back to the faith from which one has strayed (cp. Mk. 4:12 [= Is. 6:10]; Lk. 1:16; 22:32). James has described a hypothetical situation in v. 19: a

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community member that departs from the faith by becoming involved in sin of some kind and is brought back into the fold by a fellow believer.

*Morgan:* ‘Turn back’ is *epistrepsē*, a compound word with the preposition *epi* and the verb *strephō*, meaning to turn around. It is translated ‘convert’ in the KJV but it does not carry the theologically loaded idea of salvation. God does that work; we can convert no one in that sense but we can seek to turn others back to the God who saved them in the first place.

*MacArthur:* James’s use of the...three pronouns (‘one...him...he’; 5:19b; 20b) defines the agents God uses to recover straying sinners; it is the task of all believers, not merely the pastors and elders.... The goal of reaching out to a false believer in the church is simple: to ‘[turn] him back.’ *Epistrephō* (‘turns him back; turns’) is used frequently in the New Testament to speak of the sinner’s conversion to God (e.g., Luke 1:16-17; Acts 9:35; 14:15; 26:18, 20; 2 Cor. 3:16; 1 Pe. 2:25).

*Dorani:* James says that when we see anyone stray, we should try to restore him. Earlier, James reported another approach. Some prefer to slander and judge those who (in their opinion) stray (4:11-12). Both here and in 4:11-12, someone detects an error in another. The difference lies in the goal of the analyst. Slanderers and gossips speak ill in order to judge. They usurp God’s prerogatives and condemn sinners, instead of lending aid. But we should diagnose sin in order to bring restoration and a covering for sin.

*Morgan:* ‘Let him know’ (*gnōsketō*) can be understood as ‘Brothers, be assured of this.’ The pastoral heart of James continues to express itself in these final words to pray for and care for one another.

### 2. Results of Intervention (5:20b-d)

#### a) *Return from Wandering (5:20b)*

*...brings back a sinner from his wandering...*

*Moo:* *Error of his way* translates a Greek phrase (*planes hodou*) that could also be rendered ‘wandering,’ or ‘erring’ way (cp. REB; TEV; NJB). Believers are encouraged to take action to turn around a sinner who has taken a wrong and ultimately ruinous path by considering the wonderful results of such successful intervention: a soul is saved from death and many sins are covered.

*Morgan:* ‘Wandering ways’ is the same adjective that we saw in verse 19 plus the noun *hodos*, a road or way. Here it is the ethical sense of one’s way of life.... The ministry supplied here has been successful in turning a brother ‘from’ (or more literally, ‘out of’ because of the preposition *ek*) darkness and back into the way of truth.

*MacArthur:* When the false believer strays from God’s saving truth, he enters ‘the error of his way’ (lifestyle, pattern of living). *Planē* (‘error’) is the noun form of the verb *planaō*, which is translated ‘strays’ in verse 19; false faith results not only in an errant theology, but also an errant lifestyle. Those who reject God’s Word also reject the principles of godly living it teaches and shun the only power for obedience. Truth and virtue go together as do falsehood and evil behavior. Despite any outward profession of faith they might make, those who live in open defiance of God’s revelation in Scripture, do not belong to Him.... James defines the wanderer from sound doctrine and godly living as a ‘sinner.’ ... The term ‘sinner’ frequently describes hardened unbelievers, those who openly, defiantly disregard God’s law; those whose evil

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character is apparent to everyone; those whose wickedness is common knowledge.... In the New Testament, the term ‘sinner’ invariably describes those outside the kingdom of God.... A ‘sinner,’ then, is someone who is without God and Christ, and so in need of salvation; it is a word of characterization.... While Christians may sin, sin will not be their continual, unbroken practice; it will not characterize their lives. A ‘sinner,’ on the other hand, is one who continually, habitually practices sin.

b) *Save Soul from Death (5:20c)*

...will save his soul from death...

*Hughes:* This covering of sins flows from the ultimate fact that turning a sinner back *saves him from death*. The act of saving someone from death has regularly invoked a lifetime of gratitude by the one saved.... But the saving act here is even greater, for it is a saving from *spiritual* death, saving a man or woman or boy or girl from an existence of body and soul in eternal separation from God.... To be part of saving one from spiritual death is the greatest thing one human being can ever do for another!

*Moo:* ‘Death’ here, as commonly in James and almost always in the NT where sin is the issue, is ultimate ‘spiritual’ death – the condemnation to eternal damnation that results from unforgiven sin (James uses the noun ‘death’ [*Thanatos* in this sense the one other time it occurs in his letter [1:15]). James pictures death as the final destination on the path that the sinner has determined to take: when he is turned back from that journey he has ‘saved’ his life (see Ez. 18:27; Rom. 6:23; and note the spiritual application of ‘save’ [*sōzō*] elsewhere in James: 1:21; 2:14; 4:12; in 5:15, we have argued, the word has a physical connotation). But the Greek leaves somewhat ambiguous the question of whose ‘soul’ is saved and whose sins are covered. While it is possible to understand the ‘soul’ that is saved to be that of the person who does the converting, the referent of the pronoun *him* after *save* is almost certainly the sinner who has been converted.

*MacArthur:* Nothing less than each person’s eternal ‘soul’ is at stake—his most priceless possession (cp. Mk. 8:36-37). *Psuchē* (‘soul’) refers to the whole person (the Septuagint uses it in Gen. 2:7), particularly the inner, immortal person who lives in the mortal body. The threat facing the ‘soul’ is ‘death’—eternal hell, the second death, the final state of the unrepentant sinner.... ‘Save’ translates *sōzō*, the most common New Testament word for salvation.... In four of its five uses in James it refers to salvation (cp. 1:21; 2:14; 4:12; in 5:15 it refers to restoring weak, struggling Christians).

*Morgan:* ‘Will save’ is the same grammatical form as in verse 15, but here it refers to the soul of the restored sinner. The text literally reads ‘will save his soul.’ The soul is the inner life of the person in his/her relationship and responsibility toward God. That the person is saved ‘from death’ stresses the seriousness of the condition he was in. These are people in the community who stray from Christ and fall into sin.

*Dorani:* The brother who reclaims a sinner ‘will save his soul from death.’ It is possible, grammatically, to interpret this to mean the reclamer will save his own soul. Some interpreters think James means to encourage intervention but suggesting that one can find or obtain forgiveness of his own sins by interceding for others.... The Lord blesses faithfulness. When we fulfill our God-given duties, we gain assurance of our salvation (1 Tim. 4:16). Further, God often treats us as we treat others. If we pursue God’s grace for the forgiveness of others, He will forgive us (Mt. 6:14-15). But we do not *earn* salvation by working to restore a sinner.

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### c) *Cover a Multitude of Sins (5:20d)*

...and will cover a multitude of sins.

*MacArthur:* Unrepentant sinners face eternal death weighed down with a ‘multitude of sins.’ Since even one sin damns the sinner to hell, James’s use of the word ‘multitude’ emphasizes the hopeless condition of sinners. Throughout their lives they accumulate a weight of sin that ultimately will pull them down into hell.... Turning to God in repentance results in salvation; He will then ‘cover’ the ‘multitude of sins’ the repentant sinner has committed. In Psalm 32:1 David exclaimed, ‘How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!’ The writer of Psalm 85 offered the following words of praise to his forgiving God: ‘You forgave the iniquity of Your people; You covered all their sin’ (v. 2).

*Dorani:* The restorer’s goal is not selfish, therefore. He seeks to ‘cover a multitude of sins’ not by overlooking sins committed against him. Proverbs does bless those who overlook personal offenses (Pr. 10:12; 19:11), but personal offenses are not in this context. The ‘covering’ must then be God’s covering of sin. Therefore, Christians should gather their courage and speak—plainly and truthfully—to sinners, calling them to turn from sin and to the mercy of Christ.

*Hughes:* Restoration *covers over a multitude of sins*. ‘Covering’ sins signifies forgiveness, and ‘a multitude of sins’ indicates the extent of forgiveness. It is always a multitude of sins that is covered! ... This is viewed in the Bible as supreme blessedness. ‘Blessed is the one,’ sings the psalmist, ‘whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered’ (Ps. 32:1; cp. 85:2). What a blessed feat is accomplished when a sinner is turned away from his error. God alone does this. But he does use human instruments who love Him and who love people, for ‘love covers all sins’ (Pr. 10:12, NKJV).

*Morgan:* Many sins will be covered. ‘Cover’ (*kalupsei*) does not imply hiding or keeping sins secret. Rather, the sense is the same as the Old Testament concept of being forgiven and cleansed (Ps. 32:11; 85:2). Our love for the erring one must be like God’s’ once forgiven their sins should be remembered no more. Note that Galatians 6:1 established a principle for the one who would do the work of a spiritual restorer. He should himself be a spiritual person.

*Moo:* But James does not specify any personal object of the verb ‘cover,’ keeping it to a very general, almost proverbial phraseology. The words are an allusion to Proverbs 10:12, where hate, which ‘stirs up dissent,’ is contrasted with love, which ‘covers all wrongs.’ ‘Cover’ (*kaluptō* in both Proverbs and James) seems to refer her to the overlooking of slights and offenses against us in the interest of preserving peace. This meaning is unlikely in James, however, and 1 Peter 4:8 shows that the phrase had become a traditional way of denoting God’s forgiveness of sins (cp. Ps. 32:1). Many interpreters think that James intends to encourage the ‘converter’ by reminding him that he can experience forgiveness for his own sins by his disinterested intervention in the lives of other people. The notion that our efforts to bring others to repentance will bring benefit to our own spiritual standing is certainly biblical. The Lord promises Ezekiel that he ‘will save his life’ if he is faithful in warning his people of their danger of judgment (Ez. 3:21); and Paul tells Timothy that he will ‘save both himself and his hearers’ if he takes heed to himself and his teaching (1 Tim. 4:16). The blessing given to the faithful believer must not, of course, be construed as a reward for his efforts. But the idea that God will treat us as we have treated others is inescapable in Scripture (Mt. 6:14-15; 18:32-35) and explicitly mentioned by James (2:12-13). Therefore, James may well be encouraging his readers

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to seek actively the conversion of those who are straying by reminding them that their efforts will be rewarded with God's forgiveness of their own sin.

*Moo:* On the other hand, the sequence of thought in this verse makes it awkward to refer the covering of sins to a person different from the one whose salvation has just been described. Furthermore, Scripture often associates salvation with the covering, the complete blotting out, of sins, so that the two phrases could be parallel descriptions of the blessing attained by the sinner who is brought back. Probably, then, James refers to the spiritual benefits enjoyed by the sinner who is turned from his sin in both descriptions at the end of verse 20.

### 3. Summary

*Morgan:* With these pastoral words, the epistle ends abruptly. That the ending was deemed undesirable in its suddenness explains why some later scribes added a concluding 'Amen.' But such an ending is in keeping with the nature and purpose of James' work. James, Jesus' half-brother, denied the deity of Christ when He was on earth. But Jesus restored him, and this inspired letter is a fruit of that restoration. Little wonder that James closes with an appeal to restore others. Throughout the epistle James has called his readers to embrace true Christianity and to refuse mere false profession. In applying his tests for 'true religion' he has rebuked them for numerous inadequacies. In this fitting conclusion, however, James shows that his heart's desire is not to condemn but to restore unto repentance.

*Moo:* If James is indeed something of a sermon in epistolary form, these last two verses are an appropriate conclusion. Not only should the reader of James 'do' the words he has written; they should be deeply concerned to see that others 'do' them also. It is by sharing with James the conviction that there is indeed an eternal death, to which the way of sin leads, that we shall be motivated to deal with sin in our lives and in the lives of others.

*Hughes:* These are stupendous matters. 'Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.' It is this motivation that has impelled James in writing his letter from beginning to end. This is why he has been so hard-hitting—'in your face,' so to speak.

For next time: Read Jude 1-2.