

Prayer for All Seasons (Part 2)

James 5:13-18

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Let's start again to James 5 and to the ending of this great letter that we've been studying now for many months together. We come to a passage that deals with the issue of physical illness. As I thought about that this week, I read an article that was an interesting one. You may be aware that in the mid 1800s puerperal fever, or childbed fever as it's also called, was common in hospitals and it was often fatal to the mothers who went to hospitals to give birth. Along came a man by the name of Ignas Semmelweis. Semmelweis was a Hungarian physician who became the head of one of the obstetrics clinics at Vienna General Hospital. When he took over in July of 1846, a high percentage of the mothers who gave birth at the clinic died of this fever. This was widely known, by the way, throughout Vienna. Many of the mothers in Vienna preferred to give birth to their children on the street than in the hospital. Semmelweis began investigating the causes of puerperal fever and against the resistance of his superiors who believed that it could not be prevented, and a cause could not be known. But in the hospital, there was a second obstetrics clinic (there in Vienna General Hospital) and that clinic had a very low mortality rate. And so, Semmelweis wanted to know why. Why was the mortality rate from childbed fever so high in his clinic and so low in the other? And he investigated and through a series of providential circumstances, he eventually concluded that the only difference was that the doctors and students in his clinic also worked on cadavers. In those days, it was common for a doctor to move directly from one patient to the next without washing his hands. He would move from performing an autopsy on a diseased body to examining a living person and even to delivering a baby with absolutely nothing between. When Semmelweis made that connection in 1847, he ordered that in his clinic hands be washed in a chlorine solution before each examination. Suddenly, mortality rates dropped in his clinic from 18%, for mothers giving birth, to 1%. Traumatic [could not figure out what he said here but I think it is traumatic]. He had found the cause and yet he published his findings, and amazingly, the medical community rejected the practice. The scientific opinion of the time was that diseases were caused by an imbalance of the four humors of the body. Critics also argued that pausing to wash hands, between each patient, would take much too much time in the doctor's daily life. In fact, the practice of hand washing

was only widely accepted years after Semmelweis' death when Pasteur confirmed the germ theory. As a result, thousands of women lost their lives.

So, I thought about that. I was reminded of James 5 because, in a remarkable paragraph here at the end of James' letter, James argues that there is one particular kind of illness (and we'll talk about what that is) that is still commonly misdiagnosed. And the treatment for it is very simple: prayer. Let me read the passage to you. James 5, beginning in verse 13. "Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit."

Because the same subject appears in every one of those verses, it's clear that the theme of this paragraph is prayer. We noted last time that this passage breaks into two sections. First of all, in verses 13 through the middle of verse 16, we find the priority of prayer and then beginning in the middle of verse 16 running through verse 18, the power of prayer. We began, last time, to consider the priority of prayer and we discovered, in verse 13, that in all the seasons and circumstances of life, we are to pray regardless of our circumstances and regardless of our own perspective, our own emotions about those circumstances. All of those things are to serve as an impetus to drive us to God.

In verse 14, where we come today, James moves beyond that general sort of all-encompassing expression of prayer in all circumstances of life, to one very specific circumstance. We are to pray in physical sickness. Notice verse 14: "Is anyone among you sick?" Throughout history there has been much confusion about the role of disease in the world. Even today, there are many professing Christians who argue that if you're a believer God doesn't want you sick. In

fact, they claim that God will always heal those who have enough faith. If you've ever heard them teach, this is exactly what faith healers like Benny Hinn, for example, claim. Joel Osteen, the poster child - the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel - his views are very similar as well.

What does the Bible say, however, about sickness and disease? I think before we can look at James 5, we first need to back up and gain a biblical theology about illness and disease. I'm going to take a few minutes to do this because I think once we understand all the Bible teaches about illness and disease, we're in a much better position to interpret James 5. So, you bear with me because I want to give you...before we get to James 5 in our passage this morning...we will get there I promise you. But let me give you five basic propositions that summarize most of what the Bible teaches about illness and disease - five basic propositions.

Number one: sickness of all kinds traces its roots to the Fall and human sin. Sickness of all kinds finds its root in the Fall. Ultimately, every disease, every physical defect, can be traced to the reality of sin. Every illness and every sickness can be traced back to the Garden of Eden, to Genesis 3, to the Fall of Adam. It is part of the decay and entropy that came along with death as a result of sin. Romans 5 tells us that, in Adam, all die. With Adam's sin came death and with death came the partners of death: decay and entropy. Thank God, there's coming a time when death and its partners of decay and disease, will be destroyed. Revelation 21:4 says that in that day God will wipe away every tear. There will no longer be any death. There will no longer be any mourning or crying or pain. The first things have passed away. The fact that there is illness and disease in the world can be traced back to Adam's sin and the death and decay that came as a result.

Proposition number two: God is always the ultimate cause of all physical problems. God is always the ultimate cause of all physical problems. Now, this comes just by nature of the fact of being God. God is, by nature, sovereign. That means nothing happens outside of His sovereign control. But there are several passages that make it very clear that, even when it comes to physical problems, He takes responsibility. For example, God takes responsibility of congenital problems, of birth defects, of defective genes etc. In Exodus 4:11, you remember, Moses claims that he's not able to speak well. Listen to what God says to him. Exodus 4:11: "The Lord said to

him [Moses], 'Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'" So, the Lord takes absolutely full responsibility for the congenital problems that are a part of a fallen world. He also takes responsibility of diseases and illnesses and other physical maladies. In Deuteronomy 32:39, also speaking through Moses, He says, "See now that I, I am He, and there is no god besides Me; it is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal, and there is no one who can deliver from My hand." God is making the sweeping assertion about Himself; one is that in His hands lies the power of life and death. He determines who lives, He determines who dies, and he makes a sweeping assertion about His control of human illness. He says, 'I wound, and when healing comes I heal.' So, God is always the ultimate cause of all physical problems, whether congenital or diseases and other maladies.

Third proposition: God sometimes permits Satan to afflict people with illness. God sometimes uses Satan - He directs Satan to afflict people with illness for His own purposes. Job 2, of course, is the great example of that. You remember that God came, or excuse me, that Satan came to God and he said, 'Consider Job. You know, you tell me to consider him but think about why he's serving You, God. It's because you blessed him. Everything you've done for him has made him be faithful to You. But if you take away all those things that he has, he'll curse you. God said, 'It's in your power. Go!' And Satan goes and destroys everything that belongs to Job. Satan comes back to the presence of God. God says, 'Do you see that Job is still faithful to me?' And Satan says, 'Yes, but skin for skin. All that a man has will we give in exchange for his life. If you stretch forth Your hand now and affect his body, he'll curse You to Your face.' And in Job 2:6, the Lord said to Satan, "Behold he is in your power, only spare his life. Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job was sore boils from the soul of his foot to the crown of his head." Now, don't miss the point. Some people blame Satan for everything and assume that he's doing it outside the power of God. It's clear, even from this passage, that Satan can only do what God permits and allows for his own purposes but, nevertheless, Satan is the one who is afflicting. He's the tool in the hand of God to afflict Job. You see the same sort of principle in Acts 10:38. Peter, talking to Cornelius, describes Jesus this way: "...He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him." So, God

uses Satan to bring illness at times. Satan always means it for evil and God always means it for good.

Number 4: God is always the one who heals. This is in so many places throughout the Scripture. Let me just give you a few examples. Exodus 15:26 - God says to Israel, "...I, the Lord, am your healer." In Deuteronomy 32:39 (which I read for you just a moment ago) God says, "I have wounded and it is I who heal." Turn to Psalm 41. Listen to David on this issue. Psalm 41 beginning in verse 1, David writes, "How blessed is he who considers the helpless; the Lord will deliver him in a day of trouble. The Lord will protect him and keep him alive, and he shall be called blessed upon the earth; and do not give him over to the desires of his enemies." Verse 3: "The Lord will sustain him up on his sickbed; in his illness, You restore him to health." Ultimately, God is always the one who restores to health. Over just a few psalms to Psalm 68 and verse 20 we read, "God is to us a God of deliverances; and to God the Lord belong escapes from death." Whether accidental or caused by illness, when we escape death, when we are healed, it's God who does it. Psalm 103:3 – there God is described as the one "who heals all your diseases". So, God is the ultimate healer.

Now, sometimes, God heals directly. He directly intervenes in people's lives. Of course, he did it, you remember, through the life of Jesus. Jesus went about healing. Everywhere He went with divine miracles. He gave the same power to His apostles. In Matthew 10:1 He gave them the power to heal, and you see a number of accounts of this in the New Testament. When you come to the epistles there were those in the early church who were given the gift of healing - a miraculous gift (1 Corinthians 12:9, 28, and 30). I say in the days of the 'early church' because in 2 Corinthians 12:12 Paul tells us that miracles like these - the miracles of healing - were signs of the apostles. Hebrews 2:1-2 tells us that those miracles were intended to confirm the words of the apostles so that people would listen to what they said and what they wrote. And so, we have in the Scriptures a word that can be believed. But the gift of healing went away with the time of the apostles. We have both the testimony of Scripture as well as the testimony of church history. Today's faith healers are at best self-deceived and at worst charlatans and deceivers. And I'm confident both exist. By the way, that's a whole other sermon. If you want to read a little bit about that I encourage you to get Dick Mayhews book called, "The Healing Promise". There's a

chapter in that book...that is a man who has researched faith healers. He is a man who's done a lot of research about it and has the evidence. He's the guy who does the designs that...the magical deceptions for David Copperfield. And he investigated how these faith healers work. And it's quite fascinating read. They're at best self-deceived and at worst they are charlatans and deceivers. Nevertheless, and this is important to note, while there are no miracle workers today God does still work miracles of healing directly at times. Last year a dear friend of ours, in California, had severe pains in her abdomen. She eventually ended up having exploratory surgery to try to find out what was the cause. And when they opened her up, they discovered that she was literally filled with terminal cancer. They did their best to clean her out and they gave her a little bit of chemo. She eventually rejected the chemo because it wasn't really doing any good and they gave her just a couple of months to live. That was last winter...last...about a year ago. Sheila and I just heard recently that, in what appears to be a miracle of divine healing, she is now cancer free.

While I believe God can and does, on occasion, heal miraculously (listen carefully) most of the time when God heals, He does so through means. Throughout human history God has used the healing powers that He gave the body, medicine, and physicians to bring healing. For example, when you think of medicine, in the story Jesus tells of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 when the Good Samaritan discovers that man who had been attacked and robbed, how does he minister to him? He uses wine as an astringent, an antiseptic, on the wounds and then he uses oil to soothe and heal (olive oil). In 1 Timothy 5:23, Paul suggests that Timothy drink a little wine for digestive issues and other ailments. There are other examples of medicine being used and encouraged throughout the Scripture. The **same thing** holds true with doctors. Physicians are first mentioned in the patriarchal period of biblical history - in Genesis 50 and in Job 13. They've been around a long time. And in the Jewish Talmud, we read that every Jewish city had a physician that was licensed by that city's authorities. There was even a physician that was assigned to the temple to serve the priest in ancient Israel. Jesus, Himself, alludes to the value of physicians. In Matthew 9:12 He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick." It's true that doctors are not always helpful. We read that in the gospels in Mark 5:25. Mark describes a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and "had endured much at the hands of many physicians, and had spent all that she has and was not helped at all,

but rather it grown worse...” That happens. It is, after all, a practice. We don't know everything. Even today don't, for a moment, assume that doctors know everything. There's so much we don't understand and I'm confident that, if the Lord tarries, one hundred years from now the medical community will look back and shake their heads at some of what's done today.

But it's also clear that God uses doctors as an expression of His common grace. You know, every time I walk into a hospital, I'm reminded of that as I see the various technologies and ways of testing, and the various procedures and surgeries, the various skills that God has given men and women to serve His creatures. Understand, every time you see that or every time you or one of the people you love benefits from that, that is an expression of God's common grace. He is the one who allowed those technologies to be discovered. He is the one who gave skills and gifts to those men and women who are part of the medical establishment. All of that is an expression of His grace to us. In Colossians 4:14 Paul refers to Luke as “the beloved physician”. Many commentators agree that Paul is not only affirming Luke’s value as a doctor, but he's saying or implying that Luke has used his skills on Paul, that he's Paul's physician. He probably traveled with Paul and assisted him medically on a number of occasions. So, unlike certain cults’ teaching, it is acceptable to use doctors and medicine. But it is God who ultimately brings healing. Sometimes, He does it directly. Most often, He uses the means of the body's healing powers that He gave it, medicine, and doctors.

Number 5: God always uses illness to accomplish His purposes. God always use illness to accomplish His purposes. Ultimately, of course, everything God does is to bring Himself glory and so all illness is to bring God glory. You see this in a couple of texts. In John 9, you remember that there was the encounter between the disciples and Jesus. The disciples say, ‘Who sinned that this man was born blind – him or his parents?’ And that was the view they had. And Jesus says to them in verse 3, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” It’s for God's glory to be manifest. In John 11:4, when Jesus heard about Lazarus’ illness, He said, “This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God [Man] may be glorified in it.” All of our illness, ultimately, is intended to bring glory to God.

But there are specific reasons that Scripture gives us for illnesses. And I want to just give you a quick catalog of them, under this fifth proposition. Understand a few of the reasons for illness, a few of the ways God uses it in our lives. Number one: to get our attention. This is general throughout the Scripture. You see it and you'll see it in several texts that we'll look at in a moment. To get our attention, C.S. Lewis in his book, "The Problem of Pain" writes, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." It's exactly right. God uses sickness to get our attention that we are not capable of dealing with life here on our own and to turn us to Him.

Number two: sickness is intended to test our faith and build endurance; to test our faith and build endurance. In Romans 5, Paul says that tribulation, which is a general word for all of life's troubles) - tribulations produce perseverance. You see the same thing in James 1- remember where we studied there in James 1:2? "Consider it all joy my brethren, when you encounter various trials [again, which includes sickness as well], knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance [the ability to remain under]." You see, what happens is when we encounter trials, including those of illness of various kinds, it builds endurance into us. And **when** we endure those trials over time and we're still faithful to Christ, over time we get proven character, and that proven character produces hope because it shows us that we really are genuinely Christians as we remain faithful to Christ. Peter makes the same point. In 1 Peter 1:6 he says, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials [again including illness], so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold, ...even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." All trials, including illness, produce endurance and prove the genuineness of our faith.

Number three: sickness produces humility. In 2 Corinthians 12, you remember verses 7 and 8 there, Paul describes the fact that he had these amazing visions and because of those visions, to keep them from exalting himself, he was given a thorn in the flesh. The most common interpretation of that thorn in the flesh was some kind of physical problem, perhaps, with his

eyes; we really don't know and can't be sure. But it was given to keep him humble. And sometimes, God brings illness into our lives to keep us humble.

And dovetailing with that is number four: to deepen our dependence on Him; to deepen our dependence. Again, in 2 Corinthians 12, right after Paul says I was given this thorn and I sought the Lord that He might take it away from me three times, what did God say to Paul? 'No, I'm not going to do it. My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness.' When we find ourselves in the midst of sickness and ongoing struggle physically, it produces dependence. We realize we can't make it on our own; that for everything in life we need God.

Number five: it enables us (sickness in our lives) enables us to comfort others. 2 Corinthians 1:3 Paul says God is a "God of all comfort, who [and He] comforts us in all our affliction." Again, a general word for all kinds of troubles. He comforts us so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort which we ourselves are comforted by God. As we endure various issues, it puts us in a better position to understand and help and comfort others as they go through those difficulties and troubles.

Number six: (my little list here) illness and sickness makes us more like Christ; makes us more like Christ. Romans 8:28: for all things, God causes all things (that includes illness) to work together for good - that doesn't mean your happiness. What is your good? The next verse, verse 29: God predestined that we would be what? Conformed to the image of His Son. So, God causes all things to work together for our good, that is, our conformity to his Son.

Number seven: illness, sickness causes us to release our hold on this life and to long for heaven. I love the intimate expression you get from the heart of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 where he sort of lets us know what it was like to get old for him. 2 Corinthians 4:16 he says, "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying..." I resemble that remark. You know, as you get older, it just seems like **the** length of time to get ready rose because you got this longer list of lotions and creams and powders that you have put somewhere to help hold the body together. He says, "but [even] though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." And he calls **this** decaying "momentary light affliction". All that we're

enduring here is producing an eternal weight of glory because we don't look at the stuff here, we look at the eternal things, we look at heaven. Then he goes on in chapter 5:1 to say, "if the [this] earthly tent [that's the body] ...is torn down, we have a building from God [we will have a body like Christ, eternal in the heavens]." And he goes on to say (where this drives him ultimately) verse 8, he says, "[I] prefer...to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" ...because, back in the early part of the chapter (verse four) he says, "in this tent, we groan". Because of the groaning in this tent, because of the difficulty and the decay and the trouble that's associated with this tent, we long for an eternal dwelling - makes us long for heaven as we go through illness and trouble in this body and physical problems. It releases our hold on this life and makes us long for heaven.

In the same passage, number eight: I think it causes us to release our hold on those we love. Illness and sickness are designed by God, I think, to loosen our hold on those we love. Those of you who've lost loved ones (close family members) Sheila and I, over the last number of years, have seen all of our parents go into the Lord's presence - no parents, no grandparents. And as we look at that reality, as we saw them go through the pain and suffering that's often associated with the process of dying, we realized that one of the things God was doing through that process was loosening our grip on them. When you see that one you love in such pain and discomfort, what you at first thought you would never agree to, becomes your prayer. 'God, take them. Take them to where there will be no more pain, there'll be no more trouble. Take them into Your presence.' And I think God uses illness to cause us to release the illness of others, to cause us to release our hold on them.

Number nine: God sometimes uses illness for divine judgment. This is true throughout the Old Testament but, specifically, there are a lot of references I could give you, I read this week. But let me give you one from Acts 12 - Acts 23, or excuse me, Acts 12:23. It says, 'Herod..'. You remember Herod was acting like a rockstar and loving the fact that everyone is saying he was a god and not a man, and he's enjoying the moment? And we read in Acts 12:23 that an angel from God struck Herod with worms so that he died because he didn't give God the glory. There is a microcosm of how God sometimes uses illness and that is as an act of divine judgment.

And number ten and finally. And this is really where I wanted to come to is: God uses illness, sometimes, to discipline sin in the lives of believers. Look at 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 11:27. You remember, Paul is talking here about the Lord's table and the fact that there were those who were eating of the Lord's table in an unworthy way. And if they do that, they are going to be guilty of showing disrespect to the sacrifice of our Lord and to Him, Himself. "Therefore..." (verse 28) a man must examine himself, and in so doing is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup" - very serious thing to take the Lord's table and still be holding on to sin. "For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge [discern] the body of [Christ] rightly. For this reason (verse 30) many among you are weak and sick..." See what Paul is saying? He's saying to the Corinthians, 'Listen, there are people who are sick in your congregation and the reason they're sick is because it's an act of divine chastening on their sin.' Now, that isn't always the reason God brings illness. That's one of many you just saw there and there are many others that I don't even have time to show you. But that is one of the reasons God has.

So, as you look at those five propositions, you have in them an overview, a summary, of all the Bible teaches about illness. Sickness traces its roots to the fall and human sin. God is always the ultimate cause of all physical problems. God sometimes permits Satan to afflict people with illness. God is always the one who heals. And God always uses illness to accomplish His purpose.

Now, that's all an introduction. I told my wife I was crowding a message and a half into one message. But I think that was crucial because now it will take us as long to deal with James 5. With that brief theology of illness, I want us to look at James 5:14-16. As we try to unpack what's happening in these verses, we need to make sure we grasp three things: the true nature of the person's problem, the solution that James is proposing, and the outcome that he's predicting. In other words, we need to understand the diagnosis, the prescription, and the prognosis.

Let's examine, first, the diagnosis. What exactly is wrong with the person in verse 14? What is the circumstance that demands for us to call the elders of the church to pray? Well, first of all, when there's physical illness. Notice verse 14: "Is any among you sick?" The Greek word, here,

for sick can refer to spiritual weakness but when it does it's always qualified. It'll say weak in faith or weak in conscience. But usually this works because of physical illness. In fact, always in the gospels, this word is used of physical illness and James is borrowing a lot from the teaching and ministry of our Lord. So, almost universally, scholars and translators take this to be physical sickness. But it's not just any physical sickness. There are a couple of clues here that this is serious physical illness. Notice verse 14: "...he must call for the elders..." That implies that he's physically unable to go to them. He can't come to the corporate worship. He can't come to the elders. He must call them. And also notice in verse 14: "...they are to pray over him..." Several commentators make the point that this pictures someone confined to his bed and that the elders are gathered around his bed, as it were, praying over him. So, it's physical illness but it's not just physical illness, it's serious physical illness. But it's not just serious physical illness. Notice, it's when the seriously ill believer (and this is the defining point), when the seriously ill believer suspects that his illness is the result of divine discipline for unrepentant sin. When the believer suspects that his illness is serious illness, is the result of divine chastening for unrepentant sin, notice the expression in verse 15: "...if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him." You remember 1 Corinthians 11:30? It's possible for God to send illness as a discipline for unrepentant sin. Apparently, this person suspected that might be true.

But there's another reason, I think, this is a believer who thinks there's a connection between their unrepentant sin and their illness, and that is, notice the example James uses to illustrate the power of prayer. He chooses, in verses 17 and 18, Elijah. So **that's an** unusual choice. Most of us, apart from this passage, would not have thought of Elijah as a man of prayer. There are a number of others in the Old Testament that might have come to our mind first. And he chooses one specific incident from the life of Elijah and this is fascinating. What's going on in verses 17 and 18? Elijah prayed that it would not rain. You remember why? It's because, under Ahab and Jezebel, Israel (the northern tribes) were not worshipping the true God. In fact, they had turned to worship the Baals. And Elijah prayed that it would not rain, and at his prayer, the heavens shut, and it did not rain. It was an act of divine discipline on his people. And then, you remember what happened at Mount Carmel? All the prophets of Baal showed up. There was a contest as to who was the true God. God spoke with fire. Consumed the altar. Elijah slew the 400 prophets of Baal. He goes back to the people. The people say, 'We will serve Yahweh. Our

hearts have turned back to him. He alone will be our God.’ And Elijah runs before the chariot back to the city confident that God's people have repented and embraced the true God again. And after that victory, Elijah prayed that God would lift the divine chastening and send rain. Do you see the connection? You had divine physical chastening (drought) because of sin. And when there was repentance you have Elijah praying. And as a result of his prayer, that chastening was lifted, and rain brought physical healing to the land. James didn't choose this example by accident. Here you have a believer who is seriously ill, and he believes that it may be divine chastening as a result of his sin.

What's the prescription? Verse 14: “Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.” As hard as it may be to believe in Roman Catholic theology, this passage is the basis for the Sacrament of Extreme Unction or what's popularly known as Last Rites: the priest praying over the dying to remove any remnant of sin and to strengthen his soul for death. That is not what this passage teaches. In fact, there is one very strong argument against it and I'll just mention it in passing. This passage does not anticipate death but healing. It has nothing to do with last rites. Now, if you believe your serious physical illness is the result of your unrepentant sin then here's what your to do. Here's the prescription. Call for the elders of the church. Call for the plurality of godly men appointed to lead the church. We're studying elders on Sunday night. In fact, we'll finish our study of them tonight. It's those men Christ has appointed in each church to lead. And when the elders come, they are to do two things. First of all, they are to pray over him. Pray what? Pray for genuine repentance from the sin involved and pray for divine healing. This doesn't mean, by the way, that the believer isn't supposed to pray. Verse 13 says we're to pray in every circumstance. So, what the believer is really doing is calling the elders alongside to join him in praying for repentance and healing. And the elders are also to anoint him with oil. Now notice it says - the emphasis, here, is on prayer. “Pray” is the main verb of the sentence. “Anointing” is, in both English and Greek, a participle modifying the main verb. It isn't the main thing. It merely accompanies the prayer. In fact, in verse 15, we're told it's the prayer of faith that restores the sick, not the oil. What's this oil about? Well, the only other mention of anointing with oil (in the New Testament) is in Mark 6:13 where it was in conjunction with the healing miracles of the apostles. So, there's several different views as to why the oil is included

here. The two most common, however, are: there was a medicinal purpose - that's highly unlikely because oil, olive oil, might help a cut on the skin but it's not going to help cancer or something else going on inside the body) and yet this is always the prescription. More likely, it's symbolic. Symbolic of what? Well in both the Old Testament and New Testament, anointing was frequently used to symbolize the consecration of a person or thing to the use and service of God. So, anointing this person with oil is in essence saying: we're praying for his healing and that he will be restored to God's use and His service. So, pray and anoint - that's the prescription.

Verse 15 is the prognosis. What's the predicted outcome? "...and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him." Notice, here, that it's the elders' prayer and the elders' faith that are the key issue. The sick person has already demonstrated his faith. How? By believing this passage and calling the elders to come and pray. But now it's the elders' prayer and their faith and because of the repentant heart of the sick believer, and the prayer and faith of the elders, God acts. He restores the sick. He raises him up, that is, He raises him up from his sickbed, and forgives the sin. This is an absolute promise of forgiveness and divine healing when there is serious illness that is in fact connected to unrepentant sin. It's not a blanket promise that God will heal every person whom the elders go and pray over. But the cause of the prognosis here, the wonderful prognosis of healing and forgiveness, we're to make sure that we practice this.

So, there's the diagnosis, the prescription, and the prognosis. How is it we should apply this fascinating passage? Very briefly, let me give you three ways I think **we can** apply it. Number one: obviously the primary application is that if you are seriously ill, and you think it's because of divine chastening on your unrepentant sin, then call us, call the elders to come and pray. We will do exactly what this passage teaches and, of course, we're always available to pray. But as far as practicing this passage, it's in that very specific circumstance.

Number two: look at verse 16, he gives us an application. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed." Now notice, here it's not about calling the elders. It's about praying with one another, confessing our sins to one another. So, this is a slightly different situation. This verse encourages us, in less serious situations, to

practice the same principles without the elders and just with one another. Dick Mayhew, in his excellent book on this this issue of healing writes this, “For lesser spiritual problems are less established patterns of sin this was most likely how they were to keep a short account with God and prevent deterioration in a life-threatening situation.” We are to recognize it when we sin and to confess that sin to each other. That’s not a blanket sort of command to openly confess our sin to everybody. You confess your sin to the person you have sinned against. You go and make it right. You repent of that sin before it becomes an object of divine chastening in your life. Whether with physical illness or some other form of divine chasing, go and make it right. This is like the aspirin, verses 14 and 15 are the surgery.

There's a third application here and it's a reminder, listen carefully, that every time we or someone else we know is sick we must turn to God. We must turn to God in prayer even if we don't think it's a result of our sin. You know here's where I think we as Christians become careless. It's right that we have appreciation for doctors and medicine, but there comes a point at which our trust is so much in pharmaceuticals and in doctors that we lose sight of the reality that God is our healer. It is wrong to put our hope of healing in doctors and in medicine alone as if they can heal us apart from God's intervention. Turn with me to 2 Chronicles. I want to cite one last reference for you before our time is done. 2 Chronicles 16. There is a profound verse buried in the heart of the history of the kings. 2 Chronicles 16:12: “In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa became diseased in his feet. His disease was severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the Lord, but the physicians.” This passage isn't renouncing Asa for seeking doctors. It's renouncing him for seeking doctors without seeking the Lord. God does use medicine and doctors and various procedures for our good. But folks, if God Himself doesn't cause them to work, they won't benefit us for a single moment. I love the way Alec Motyer, in his commentary, puts it: “Even when we go to the doctor, our eyes are to the Lord. He alone can heal. There is no such thing as non-spiritual healing. When the aspirin works, it is the Lord who made it work. When the surgeon sets the broken limb and the bone knits, it is the Lord who has made it knit. Every good gift is from above. On no occasion should a Christian approach a doctor without also approaching God.” That's exactly right. When you're sick, pray. Ask others to pray with you even if you don't think it's connected to your sin. But if you think it is connected to your unrepentant sin, then you follow the process that's outlined in James 5. Why?

Look at the second half verse 16: “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” Lord willing, in a couple of weeks, we’ll look at the power a prayer.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You that You are our healer, that you are the God who wounds, who brings illness and disease into our lives to accomplish Your own purposes, and that when You choose, in Your own sovereign purpose to heal, You it is, alone, who heals. Father thank You that You and Your common grace have given us doctors and medicine. You've caused our bodies to be self-repairing and yet, Father, don't let us ever put our confidence in these things because it's You, ultimately, who uses these things to accomplish healing in us. Forgive us Father for putting our confidence in pharmaceuticals and in doctors, alone, and not coming to You and putting our trust ultimately in You to make those things work to our good. Father I pray that You would cause us in all of life, in all of life's circumstances - whether we are suffering, whether we are careful, or whether we are sick - to run to You. May we find You to be our refuge, our very present help in time of trouble. We pray in Jesus' name, for His glory, Amen!