

of life, we always have the sure foundation of our life in Yeshua, both now and forever.

Finally, James teaches us in the opening phrase of our verse that believers are not expected to suffer needlessly, or always to “be happy” or to “hide one’s sorrows” that come in times of suffering. The believer does not always live on a mountain top of faith. We live out the reality of our faith when on the mountain top as well as when we traverse the valley. As Yeshua teaches us:

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world. (Jn 16:33)

14 – Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the *ekklesia* and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;

One of the ways that suffering comes upon us in this fallen world is through sickness and disease. Surely believers experience physical sickness as James here indicates, for he is writing to the community of believers and asks, “Is anyone among you sick?” He expects that sickness will be a common thing experienced by those who are part of the believing community. The word translated “sick” in our text is the Greek word ἀσθενέω (*astheneō*), which does carry a primary sense of “suffering a debilitating illness,”¹ but this word can also bear the sense of “experiencing a personal incapacity or limitation, to be weak” or even “to be in need.”² However, the following context would surely favor the interpretation that James is describing a physical sickness and even a sickness that may be life-threatening.

Thus, he admonishes those who are sick, not just with something that will surely pass quickly, but by a sickness that lingers on or which brings special or acute difficulties, to call for the elders of the *ekklesia*. Here once again it is clear that the normal life of everyone who professes to be a follower of Yeshua is to be in community with other believers. Even as prayer and the scriptures are the essential means of grace for the believer, so is the communion of the believers. It is as we gather together and share life together that we are enabled to help and encourage each other, and to show a watching world what it means to

1 BDAG, “ἀσθενέω,” p. 142.

2 Ibid.

love one another as our Lord commands.

Excursus: The Terms Elders, Overseers, and Deacons

James instructs the believer who is sick to “call for the elders of the *ekklesia*.” He puts the responsibility upon the “elders” (the plural of *πρεσβύτερος*, *presbuteros*) to attend to the individual. Since James gives us no further details regarding the office of “Elder,” it is clear that by the time of his writing this epistle, the office or position of “elder” within the local messianic community was already well in place.

Indeed, the position of “elder” is one of the established offices within the *ekklesia* of Yeshua. In the epistles of the Apostolic Scriptures, we essentially find three titles or designations for leaders within the believing communities: overseer (*ἐπίσκοπος*, *episkopos*, sometimes translated “bishop”), elder (*πρεσβύτερος*, *presbuteros*), and deacon (*διάκονος*, *diakonos*).

An “overseer” is someone who is given the responsibility of safeguarding the community and the people who are part of the community.” The responsibility of safeguarding the believing community is well demonstrated and explained when Paul used the metaphor of a “shepherd” to describe their responsibilities.

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the *ekklesia* of God which He purchased with His own blood. (Acts 20:28)

In fact, this text, when read in the larger context, gives good proof that the term “elder,” which generally describes an older man, but became a term to denote a leadership position in the *ekklesia* of Yeshua, is simply another designation of an overseer. For it is clear that Paul has called to himself the “elders” of the community in Ephesus, and then he addresses them as “overseers” as he encourages them to fulfill their divinely ordained work. Thus, the context of Paul addressing the overseers from Ephesus begins:

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the *ekklesia*. (Acts 20:17)

That “elders” and “overseers” are two terms describing the same office is likewise strengthened by the fact that in Paul’s epistle to Titus, he uses the terms “elder” and “overseer” to designate the same office and responsibilities.

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. (Titus 1:5–9)

Note also Peter's words of admonition to the elders in which he indicates that elders must function in the capacity of overseers as well as spiritual shepherds.

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Messiah, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1Pet 5:1–4)

Likewise, Paul only mentions two offices when he writes his epistle to the Philippians. It would seem most likely that if there were three offices prescribed by the Apostles for the *ekklesia* of Yeshua, Paul would mention all three, but here he only includes two offices, indicating that the office of "elder" and "overseer" is one and the same.

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Messiah Yeshua, to all the saints in Messiah Yeshua who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: (Phil 1:1)

The title "deacon" derives from the Greek *διάκονος* (*diakonos*) and was used commonly in the Greek culture to denote those who wait on tables. Thus, in the *ekklesia* of Yeshua, the term was used to denote those who would be appointed to care for community members in need, helping to attend to their physical needs with the provisions supplied by the community at large.

----- End of Excursus -----

...and they are to pray over him – The terminology used here, “to pray over him,” (προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ αὐτόν) emphasizes the fact that the elders of the *ekklesia* are functioning in their God-given authority and are thus calling upon Yeshua Himself, the Head of the *ekklesia* under Whom they serve, to minister His divine power of healing to the one who is suffering from physical sickness. The language to pray “over” (ἐπί, *epi*) someone pictures on the one hand the submissive spirit of the one who is sick, and on the other the responsibility of the elders/overseers to care for and protect those whom they shepherd. But it may also picture the elders placing their hands upon the sick person as they pray. Though contained in the long ending of Mark,¹ and clearly not part of the inspired Scriptures, the parallel in terms of what “praying over” might mean is interesting.²

These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

...anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord – Much has been written and many speculations given as to what James intends his readers to understand by this phrase. Clearly, the most important aspect of this phrase is the final “in the name of the Lord,” for it emphasizes that it is not a human ritual, nor the power of those who do the anointing, by which healing comes to the one who is sick. The primary emphasis is clearly that the Lord is the One Who enables healing and that all praise must therefore go to Him when prayers for healing result in healing the sick.

But what, then, are we to understand by James’ exhortation that the elders or overseers are to “anoint with oil” the sick person who has called for them? We find this phrase only one other time in the Apostolic Scriptures, when Yeshua sent the Twelve out to minister:

And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them. (Mark 6:13)

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- 1 Only the late manuscripts include vv. 9–20 of Mark 16. That none of the earlier manuscripts have this section would indicate that it was added later and was not part of the original autograph of the Gospel of Mark.
 - 2 For other Scriptures that use “laying hands” on someone, cf. Matt 19:13; Mk 5:23; Lk 20:19; 21:12; 22:53; Acts 8:19; 9:12; 1Tim 5:22.

As one might expect, in time certain sects of the Christian Church took these verses to mean that special power was granted to the leaders of the Church, and from early times such powers were formulated into “sacraments” given to their congregants.

Some have interpreted our James passage as dealing with exorcism, interpreting the text to be speaking of a sick person whose illness is the result of demonic attack. Still others have not limited the application of our text to those who are demonized, but understand it specifically as a special ability of elders in the church to effect healing of the sick. The Greek Orthodox Church has made anointing with oil a “sacrament” conducted by seven priests (though sometime as few as two or three) and the sick person is anointed seven times with oil that has been blessed by a priest. However, they do not teach that the sacrament of anointing is guaranteed to heal the sick, but only that it allows the one being anointed to receive “Holy Unction,” enabling them to “participate in Christ’s sufferings,” thus liberating them from spiritual illness and death.

The Roman Catholic Church, before Vatican II, understood our text as teaching the “Sacrament of Anointing” as being a person’s “last or final anointing” before death. Such anointing, so it is taught, brings spiritual strength and (at times) physical strength during an illness, but especially when the illness is bringing the person near to the time of death.

But all of this misses the obvious fact that James is writing to Jewish and non-Jewish believers who, together have formed a worshiping community with Yeshua as their Head. Though in our current text James uses the term *ekklesia*, in 2:2 he writes of “a man who comes into your synagogue” (*ἐάν γὰρ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς συναγωγὴν ὑμῶν ἀνὴρ*). This is not the “Christian Church” of the Roman Catholics or Greek Orthodox which developed much later. Rather, it is the early messianic community of believers with appointed elders and deacons.

...in the name of the Lord – The primary emphasis of our verse, then, is upon the power of the Lord in healing the sick, and that prayer must always come from a heart of faith, fully believing that God can and will bring about His perfect will in all that is requested of Him. The Lord is the One Who brings the healing, not some special power invested in the elders of the *ekklesia*, or in the *ekklesia* itself.

Thus, we are reminded that we are always to pray that God’s will would be done, knowing by faith that the answer to our prayers will bring Him glory and cause His purposes to be established. Yeshua taught us this in His teaching on prayer:

Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who is in heaven, hal-
 lowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven. (Matt 6:9–10)

But what, then, are we to make of the admonition of James, to anoint the sick person with oil? It is true that olive oil was used for medicinal purposes in ancient Israel (cf. Is 1:6) as well as noted in the Apostolic Scriptures (cf. Lk 10:34)¹ and it is not uncommon to find those who interpret the anointing prescribed by James in our text as having a medicinal purpose.

Of course, others see it as a religious sacrament (as noted above) and consider it to be the power invested in the organized church, distributed by its elders, given to the sick person as a “sacrament” endowed with healing power or to prepare them for their death.

It seems to me, however, that the best understanding of James’ admonition to “anoint with oil” is to be understood as representative or symbolic of the power of God to heal. Even as the Ruach is pictured as being “pour out,”² so the anointing with oil is to be a vivid expression of God’s power and ability to heal the believer who is sick through the power of His abiding Ruach HaKodesh. The anointing with oil, then, functions as a vivid reminder of the work of God’s Spirit in bringing His will to be accomplished for all who are His.

What is more, very often when a person is afflicted with sickness, they are given a keen opportunity to evaluate their own life and to take “inventory” of what is of greatest importance. Even as anointing in the Scriptures frequently symbolizes the consecration of people or things for God’s use and service,³ so it may well be that the anointing with oil in our text is to make clear to the person being anointed that they are being set apart for God’s healing power through the avenue of prayer. It seems, then, that “anointing” in our verse is a physical action with symbolic significance.⁴

1 For the use of oil as a healing substance in the ancient world, see Moo, *James*, p. 238.

2 Cf. Acts 2:33, 38; 10:45; Rom 5:5; Titus 3:5-6.

3 Cf. Ex 28:41; Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2Cor. 1:21; Heb. 1:9.

4 Moo, *James*, p. 240.

15 – and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

Here, once again, we see that the emphasis James wishes to make is that prayer, which is rightly based upon faith, is that which God uses to bring about healing, both spiritually and physically. The healing cannot be attributed to the elders nor to the body of believers they lead and represent.

The word translated “prayer” is εὐχῆ (euxe) in the Greek, and is found only two other times in the Apostolic Scriptures. In both of these, the meaning is “vow.”

Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. (Acts 18:18)

Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. (Acts 21:23-24)

...*the prayer offered in faith* –The verb that is cognate to *euxe*, “prayer,” is εὐχομαι (*euxomai*), “to pray,” and has its primary sense of “to speak to or to make requests of God, to pray.”¹ Therefore, even though the noun *euxe* is most often used to denote a vow, it could also be understood in the sense of “to plead” and thus “to pray.”

Once again, James emphasizes the necessity of combining prayer with faith. Indeed, faith in God and in His ability to do all of His holy will is the very basis of prayer for the child of God.

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. (Heb 11:6)

... *will restore the one who is sick* – All too often our text has been interpreted as guaranteeing full healing if one actually has enough

1 BDAG, “εὐχομαι,” p. 417.

faith “to make it happen.” This, of course, is not what James is teaching us here, nor is it the teaching of Scripture as a whole. The “prayer of faith” means a prayer that fully believes God is able to do all of His will, including healing the sick regardless of the gravity of the illness with which one is afflicted. But genuine faith likewise is committed to seeing God’s will done, and so the prayer of faith is fully committing oneself to God’s will, and accepting the outcome as a demonstration of God’s will and purposes.

...*will restore* – We might expect James to have written “will heal the one who is sick,” but actually the Greek has *σώσει τὸν κάμνοντα*, “will save the sick.” It is the common verb found in the Scriptures to describe a sinner who is “saved” from the wrath of God through faith in Yeshua. And on this account, some interpret our text as having eternal salvation as the ultimate outcome, when an unbeliever is miraculously healed. But the context speaks against this, for the person who is sick has called for the elders of the *ekklesia* of which he a part. Moreover, the verb *sōzō* is regularly used in the context of the physical healing of a sick person.¹

It is interesting to note how James uses this same word, *sōzō*, elsewhere in his epistle:

Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:21)

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14)

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor? (James 4:12)

let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:20)

... *and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.* It could be, then, that in our context the sickness being described may have come upon a believer because he allowed sin to remain in his life. If this is so, the indication that there has been the work of God within the

1 Cf. Matt 9:21, 22; Mk 3:4; 5:23, 28, 34; 6:56; 10:52; Lk 7:50; 8:48, 50; 17:19; 18:42; Jn 11:12.

one who is sick, is evidenced by his willingness to call the elders to pray. This means that the healing may thus be both inward healing of one's conscience before the Lord as well as the removal of the sickness used to bring the child of God to admit his sin and seek forgiveness. This interpretation of our text would thereby make sense of this final clause, for James ends with the possibility that the one who is sick has come under this difficulty by God's grace, to arrest his attention back to making things right with his Lord.