



“Are any among you sick?” The Church’s Healing Mandate (James 5:13–20)

FREDERICK J. GAISER

The forgiveness of sins, in my opinion, is the most powerful therapeutic idea in the world.

—Leslie D. Weatherhead¹

“**H**ow ya’ doing?” Usually, in our culture, that’s a quick fly-by question that does not expect—or even want—a clinical answer. It’s a casual acknowledgment of the presence of another that does not yet approach the depth of James’s query: “Are any among you sick?”

Are you sick? The answer will depend on the context, the questioner, the location, the time available, and what we mean by “you.” Is that a singular or a plural “you”? You can tell in Greek, so we know that James meant the “you” to be plural. But the “any” is singular. Thus: “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him” (Jas 5:14 RSV). Gender issues confuse our translations now, but James’s concern remains: Is any one (singular) of you (plural) sick? Let him (singular) call for the elders (plural) of the church. Singular and plural are mixed up here—properly so, and we will have to come back to that.

¹Leslie D. Weatherhead, *Psychology, Religion and Healing* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951) 338.

James has a broad definition of “healing.” We will need to understand the letter’s promise of healing in terms of what it says about prayer, salvation, forgiveness, ethics, and even the tongue.

Sickness and wellness are both singular and plural matters²—in the Letter of James and in life as we know it.

JAMES'S QUESTION IN CONTEXT

We have learned that we need to understand texts in their context(s), not in isolation. So we can't understand what James wants to say about healing simply by reading those few verses at the end of chapter 5:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (Jas 5:13–20)

How do these verses fit into the argument or structure of the whole book? Or is there one? Most now argue that such an overall structure can be found (contra Dibelius), but what does it look like?³ I will assume here that the book deliberately hangs together, but will not enter into the technical arguments (for which, see the commentaries).⁴ But if the book is, in any sense, a whole, then we will need to understand James on healing in terms of what James says about prayer, salvation, forgiveness, ethics, and even the tongue.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HEALED?

James asks if any are sick (5:14) and then proposes ways in which they may be “healed” (5:16). Supposedly, James is asking, first, whether any of the “beloved brothers and sisters” to whom he writes (2:5) are bothered by some physical ailment, though the term he uses (“sick”) is already broad in the Greek New Testament, and James's concern is broadened the more by his prior question about their “suffering” (2:13). James is concerned about the overall well-being of his audience, including their physical health.⁵ So, where and how will they be “healed”?

²For more on this, see my book *Healing in the Bible: Theological Insight for Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) 242–245.

³For more on this, see Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 22–27.

⁴Indeed, my goal in this article is not to provide a detailed exegesis of these verses in James, but rather to read James's counsel on healing in interaction with the Letter of James as a whole and within the context of a broader biblical theology.

⁵Pentecostal Christians have sometimes been seen as insistent only on the promise and reality of physical

If we are physically sick, eventually we will probably go to the doctor. But in that clinical setting, we will seek first “cure” (or at least some kind of relief) rather than “healing.”⁶ Philip Alcabas, in a recent article, calls today’s medical centers “temples of diagnosis.”⁷ Here, Alcabas enters the ongoing argument about what patients want, what they need, and what they get—about the relationship between healing and curing. Certainly, we want relief from particular symptoms, and we might be happy to hear our physician say, “We have a pill for that,” but Alcabas is correct that, beyond that, “we have a persistent yearning to interact with a sympathetic healer who knows our unique selves as reflected in our infirmities.”⁸ James seems to be addressing that broader “persistent yearning” without thereby dismissing the interest in particular relief. Contra many interpreters, the Bible nowhere disparages the work of the physician⁹ (indeed, a perfectly good translation of Exod 15:26 would be, “I am the Lord, your physician”), but the Bible will never be content with “mere” physical healing—thus, the almost random mixture in James of terms for healing, sickness, forgiveness, saving, suffering, praise, and prayer. For James, these things are all of a piece.

“we have a persistent yearning to interact with a sympathetic healer who knows our unique selves as reflected in our infirmities”

Alcabas names our yearning for a healer who knows “our unique selves,” that is, one who knows our story rather than merely our symptoms. But knowing our story takes time. My own physician’s reception room has a chart noting the proposed waiting time to see each doctor. If my own visit will be delayed by minutes or even an hour, I first sigh with frustration, but then I tell myself that this is a good thing, since it means he is taking time with prior patients and thus will presumably do so with me.

The brilliance of the books of Oliver Sacks lies in his ability to tell the story of each of his patients—a case history that moves far beyond clinical data.¹⁰ To know their story is to know the person, thus gaining empathy and understanding. John Swinton suggests that mental health problems can be described as “a rupture in the stories we tell ourselves and that are told about us.”¹¹ I have suggested that in his healing of the epileptic boy, Jesus, too, took a “case history”¹²—that is, a story in

healing, but Keith Warrington, commenting on this text, recognizes that “God cares for all aspects of the life of the believer, his aim being to provide restoration and wholeness”; in Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology: A Theology of Encounter* (London: T & T Clark, 2008) 268.

⁶For more on the relationship healing and cure, see Gaiser, *Healing*, 177–190.

⁷Philip Alcabas, “Failure to Heal,” *The American Scholar* 84/2 (Spring 2015) 81.

⁸*Ibid.*, 84.

⁹Gaiser, *Healing*, 28–34.

¹⁰See, for example, Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

¹¹John Swinton, “Time, Hospitality, and Belonging: Towards a Practical Theology of Mental Health,” *Word & World* 35/2 (2015) 173.

¹²Gaiser, *Healing*, 140–141.

which the illness can be understood and treated. Stories matter, to us, to Jesus, and no doubt to James. Healing occurs within a story, within a life, within a community.

HEALING AND FORGIVENESS

James seems inextricably to link healing with forgiveness. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Weatherhead, in the epigraph to this article, calls the forgiveness of sins “the most powerful therapeutic idea in the world.” Any who have been burdened by guilt and the inevitable accompanying loss of self-worth can agree with this. We rightly begin our liturgies with a confession of sins and absolution in order to free us to participate fully in the worship to follow and the life of service that follows upon that.

The Bible recognizes, as Stanley Leavy has observed, that the human “is a discontented animal.” James lives in this “discontented” world, but recognizes that God has provided a way forward: prayer, confession, and what Luther will come to call the “mutual consolation of the saints.”

Some object that such “quick” forgiveness (a couple of paragraphs in a worship book or bulletin) seems too easy, even too painless—and it can be, if we allot too little time for self-examination or see the liturgical act of confession and forgiveness in isolation from the full service of word and sacrament. James understands confession and forgiveness more deeply: “Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls” (1:21). Confession recognizes human sordidness and wickedness (our own, as well) and appeals for renewal to an “implanted” word. Exegetes differ on the exact sense of this phrase, but something “implanted” must come from outside ourselves. Biblical theology more broadly recognizes this as the word of forgiveness that comes from without, from God—usually from another, speaking in God’s name—to set us free. This is certainly the “therapeutic idea” that Weatherhead had in mind.

Others object that beginning worship with confession is a “downer” and want to move immediately to praise and joy. But praise never works like that in the Bible. It follows lament, the recognition that all is not well—not with me, not with the world—and God’s announcement of salvation nevertheless. The Bible recognizes, as Stanley Leavy has observed, that the human “is a discontented animal.” It is, as he says, only “out of our unhappiness, our fear, our guilt, that we can recognize the gift of salvation.” Thus, the critics of religion and faith, those who see all of this as fantasy, “are quite right in supposing that a fully satisfied human, with no failures, no sense of wrongdoing, no griefs, no fears, no longing for the eternal, would have no occasion to look to God. But it is they who are indulging in fantasy

when they imagine such a creature and suppose it to be human.”¹³ James lives in this “discontented” world, but recognizes that God has provided a way forward: prayer, confession, and what Luther will come to call the “mutual consolation of the saints.”

The linkage of healing and forgiveness can be destructive in another way as well, assuming or hearing that one who is ill must be, somehow, at fault—too many cigarettes, too much fat, too little exercise, or the consequences of a misspent life in other ways. Deuteronomic theology and public health medicine both recognize the possible truth of such observations. But both also recognize that life is not fair and that, while X may well produce Y, one cannot see Y and necessarily infer X. Jesus rejects this you-get-what’s-coming-to-you thinking with his dismissal of the disciples’ question about who sinned, “this man or his parents that he was born blind” (John 9:2). Things are not that easy, yet nevertheless forgiveness is always appropriate, always needed, and always “therapeutic.” As James sees, it is an avenue of healing.

HEALING AND COMMUNITY

Years ago, a nurse, shooing me out of my daughter’s hospital room where she lay dangerously ill, told me that I must leave because visiting hours were now over and besides, “she needs to learn to get well on her own.” Other nurses, hearing this comment, have been as appalled as I was at the time. James would be on our side. No one can be well on their own. Thus, we hear James’s counsel to “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you [plural] may be healed” (5:16).

A danger of confidentiality agreements, even in churches—necessary as they may be in our litigious society—is that they prevent us from heeding this word. In effect, they prevent us from being the church. How can we confess our sins to one another and pray for one another and be healed (collectively!) if we are not permitted to know what is going on? Perhaps this worked better in the small Christian communities of the early church than in the large congregations (or even megachurches) of our own day, but if so, in this respect at least, huge organizations (while providing many other opportunities) might fail us. Perhaps there are reasons for the move toward various forms of “smaller is better” among Christian communities—or toward movements with names like “Faith Uncorked” within larger congregations.

For Martin Luther, at least in Article 4 of his *Smalcald Articles* (1537), the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters” was right up there along with word and sacrament as a divine means of grace.¹⁴ For Jesus, too: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”

¹³Stanley Leavy, *In the Image of God: A Psychoanalyst's View* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 67–68.

¹⁴In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 319.

(Matt 18:20). In our text, James moves in that company, even though he would not, of course, recognize Luther's language. Confession, salvation, forgiveness of sins, healing, prayer—all are corporate. To be sure, *individuals* pray, individuals are healed, individuals are forgiven; but these things come to individuals who reside in community and the gifts are bestowed in and through that community. These gifts are “for you” (Luther's language) both individually and communally.

This emphasis on community points also to the connection between healing, saving, and ethics. It is perhaps no accident that this section on healing is preceded by a warning to rich oppressors and by a call to patience in suffering on the part of the faithful. In Jas 5:1–6, the “rich people” (perhaps outside the community) are reminded that wealth will not last and, in the end, cannot protect (sounding a lot like Jesus and the prophets). This call to judgment gives hope to the “beloved,” who can endure suffering because “the Lord is near” (5:7–11). But while enduring, the community is called to “the prayer of faith” that “will save the sick” (5:15). So, endure because the Lord is coming, but pray because the Lord is present.

raising up, saving, and forgiveness remain the Lord's work in James, but James urges our prayer, anointing, and visitation to further the Lord's purposes

It is not merely the wealthy outsiders who hear a warning from James. His call to show no partiality (2:1–13) gives rise to his often maligned (at least by Lutherans) contrast between faith and works.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (2:14–17)

Other authors in this issue will wrestle with the question of the relationship between faith and works.¹⁵ In the context of this article, though, it will help to notice the contrast between the prayer of faith that will “save the sick” (5:15) and the barren faith of 2:14 that can “save” neither “you” nor the neighbor in need. This contrast may well be deliberate, and it will help us understand that perhaps James and Romans are not so far apart after all. James is interested both in the “implanted word” that saves and in the life of faith that follows.

With that in mind, notice that the prayer of faith, which will “save the sick,” is followed immediately by “and the Lord will raise them up” (also 5:15). Raising up, saving, and forgiveness remain the Lord's work in James, but James urges our prayer, anointing, and visitation to further the Lord's purposes. More, James's ref-

¹⁵See especially, Timothy J. Wengert, “Building on the One Foundation with Straw,” *Word & World* 35/3 (2015) 251–261.

erence to the “raising up” of the sick, especially in the light of his eschatological hope of the coming end, may play off Peter’s “raising up” of the crippled beggar (Acts 3:7), which quite deliberately points to the “raising” of Christ from the dead in Peter’s subsequent sermon (Acts 3:15). The Greek verb (*egeirō*) is the same in all these texts. Peter’s raising up the beggar and God’s resurrecting Jesus intersect in Acts 3, just as our prayer of faith and the Lord’s “raising up” of the sick work together toward healing in James 5.

HEALING THE TONGUE

What do we make of James’s recurring emphasis on taming the tongue (1:26–27; 3:8; cf. 4:31), especially as we consider the issue of healing? “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not be so” (3:10). Yet it was so in James’s day and remains so in our own. (“Do you eat with that mouth?”) Words kill, tongues kill, and it ought not be so. But mouths and tongues also pray, and prayer heals. How can this be?

Perhaps James’s emphasis on community can help us here. People say things anonymously that they would never dare say in person (or if held accountable by name)—witness the dreadful anonymous replies and tweets on the Internet or the obscene and vicious shouts arising from within the anonymity provided by a crowd. Such attacks, to put it mildly, hardly serve Luther’s call to put the best construction on our neighbor’s words and actions (explanation of the Eighth Commandment in the *Small Catechism*).¹⁶ Apparently, we need to know one another and to be known ourselves—by name and face—to make this happen. Again, we cannot be “well” alone. The deadly work of the tongue (or keyboard) demeans the other and dehumanizes the speaker. Communal health and healing simply go away.

Leif Vaage suggests, therefore, that we must read the epistle from the social, political, and economic borderline.¹⁷ Starting with the “big” issues (faith and works, for example, or even a generalized concern for the poor) won’t take us anywhere unless, says Vaage, we begin with a smaller concern (as does James), namely, the tongue: “[T]he larger realignment of the social (cosmic) order in the direction of a more divine life thus begins with a certain regional speech therapy. That is why faith without works is dead: it cannot exist apart from proper expression.”¹⁸

Thus, as James puts it, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless” (Jas 1:26 NRSV). But, actually, we need a politically incorrect translation here, one that keeps the singular: “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless” (Jas 1:26 NKJV). We can use

¹⁶In, for example, *The Book of Concord*, 353.

¹⁷Leif E. Vaage, “Such a Little Thing! The Tongue and Alternative Subjectivity in the Epistle of James,” in *Borderline Exegesis* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014) 105–124.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 113.

“she” and “her,” to be sure, but we need the singular. To get at the whole, we must start with the one. We need to address the one who is at fault (including, of course, me), and we need the one (say, James) to be the prophet, to call us to task. So for James, to get at the big issues, like care for the poor, we must begin small—with the tongue. “In other words, a living faith necessarily includes the mundane details of daily life,” especially “that little thing that is the tongue.”¹⁹ Perhaps we *need* James not to be Romans (at least, a misread Romans), to be the outlier who can function as prophet and counselor to move us in the right direction—indeed, toward healing. In this, the one serves the community, just as later the community serves the one, in praying for and anointing the sick.

HEALING AND PRAYER

My article is about healing in James, though the entire section is more properly subsumed under the letter’s discussion of prayer. The Lord heals through prayer. That’s why we call upon the community in times of need (just as we do in times of joy). We need the other. We need “the prayer of the righteous” (5:16). The text calls for this prayer of “the righteous person” (singular), but who is righteous? Lutherans, in their preference for Romans over James, might invoke Rom 3:10: “There is no one who is righteous, not even one.”

Jasper Fforde plays with this dilemma in one of his Thursday Next novels. In the novel, the characters need to find a righteous person to avoid the Almighty’s “smiting” of their town of Swindon (à la Gen 18).²⁰ “Find one of those [a righteous person], place him or her near the sinful, and *bingo*—the Lord cannot smite the righteous on a matter of principle.”²¹ But where to find such a person? Thursday offers, “I know some *self*-righteous ones,” to which her son Friday says, “That’s not really the same thing at all.”²²

Right. Self-righteous is not righteous. So, for James, this must mean the prayer of one of the community of the faithful, one who offers “the prayer of faith” (5:15). To show that such prayer is not magic, and not even the prayer of some marvelous “prayer warrior,” James gives as example the prayer of Elijah, who was “a human being like us” (5:17). His prayer affected even the rain! But that, like the healing James foresees, was not magic. If we go back to the Old Testament text (1 Kings 17–18), Elijah’s prayer was effective because it merged with the divine will. Elijah did not so much cause the drought or the rain; rather, as a prophet, he interpreted it.²³ James knew, too, that “the early and the late rains” were simply a part of

¹⁹Ibid., 124.

²⁰Jasper Fforde, *The Woman Who Died a Lot* (New York: Viking, 2012).

²¹Ibid., 224–225.

²²Ibid., 225.

²³It is possible that James’s emphasis on Elijah’s nature (“like us”) deliberately de-emphasizes the enhanced role of Elijah in later Jewish tradition. However, even though Sirach includes Elijah in his praise of “famous men” (Sir 44–50), exulting in “how glorious” were Elijah’s “wondrous deeds” (48:4), Sirach recognizes that it is “by the word of the Lord” that Elijah “shut up the heavens” (48:3)—that is, this is not Elijah’s own doing.

the natural order (Jas 5:7). Waiting for the rain might serve as a model of waiting for the coming of the Lord, but as the farmer knows, rain is unpredictable, so one must wait—just as Christians wait in patience and pray for healing, confident that God hears and responds as God wills. Thus, the ultimate “prayer of faith” is always “Your will be done” (Matt 6:10). Going for a moment with the tradition that understands the James of the letter as the brother of Jesus, then James will have heard this from Jesus’ own lips.

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And what of the oil? Later generations will debate whether the elders’ anointing that accompanied their prayer was medicinal, symbolic, or even sacramental. While their anointing “in the name of the Lord” (5:14) marks this as some kind of sacred action or rite, there is probably no distinction being made here between medicinal care and ritual care. Those distinctions will come later. God is present in the prayer and in the anointing, and both serve to heal. Recall how the Good Samaritan used “wine and oil” to treat the wounds of the man attacked by robbers (Luke 10:33–34). Oil as balm? Wine as disinfectant? In any case, the Samaritan’s treatment shows “compassion,” and through it, God heals. Similarly, in the call to “honor the physician” (Sir 38:1), medicine, oil, and prayer are skillfully interwoven “for the sake of preserving life” (38:14).²⁴ This is the world in which James lives and part of the wisdom tradition that informs his letter.

NO GUARANTEES

There is no guarantee of physical healing for those who believe or those who pray. Though Warrington can say that in our text James offers “guidelines for healing praxis to be undertaken by the local church on behalf of one another,”²⁵ these “guidelines” dare not be seen as some kind of divine blueprint that will guarantee our desired result. Warrington says as much: “It is also increasingly appreciated [among Pentecostals] that suffering can form a significantly important platform for glorifying God and reflecting his character in a context of weakness.”²⁶ On the other hand—as we know from both the lament psalms and the personal experience of ourselves or others—great suffering can also separate from God and the other, producing even the cursing or renunciation of God. Then, the church is called to reach out to those others, embracing them even in their suffering and alienation,

²⁴Gaiser, *Healing*, 124–125.

²⁵Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 269.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 278–279.

rejecting what Luke Timothy Johnson calls “the logic of the world,” which is “to isolate the sick from the healthy” for the sake of self-protection.²⁷ Obviously, self-protection, isolation, and HazMat suits make sense in something like an Ebola epidemic, but perhaps the true “prayer warriors” are those who refuse to scorn the poor (Jas 2:6), to make isolation the last word, and who enter the arena of danger for the sake of the other.

In his insistence on a communal understanding of health and healing, James seems to suggest that the Christian reply to the casual inquiry “How ya’ doing?” will have to be more than a quick “Fine, thank you.” We will need something like the Shona response in Zimbabwe: “I am well if you are well.”²⁸ ⊕

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²⁷Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Letter of James: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. XII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 224.

²⁸See Gaiser, *Healing*, 95.

King James 2000 Bible Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: American King James Version Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: American Standard Version Is any among you sick? Mark 6:13 They also drove out many demons and healed many of the sick, anointing them with oil. Mark 16:18 they will pick up snakes with their hands, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not harm them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will be made well." Acts 11:30 This they did, sending their gifts to the elders with Barnabas and Saul. Prayer for the Spiritually Sick. James 5:13-16 (NET Bible). 13 "Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praises. 14 Is anyone among you ill? Treatment of spiritual sickness experienced by a member of the Christian congregation is considered at James 5:13-20. The context, which contrasts being sick with being in good spirits, shows that James was dealing, not with physical illness, but with spiritual sickness .By approaching the warm hearted and spiritually strong elders,their Bible counsel and prayer with him, will be comforting to anyone being truly repentant. Concerning remedial steps and their effectiveness, James wrote: 13 "Is anyone among you suffering?(spiritually) He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? James L. Gibb is an Australian educator, novelist and health researcher with a particular focus on food-related diseases. A university graduate with a diploma of education, Gibb became interested in the relationship between nutrition and health when a family member was diagnosed with a chronic disease. Their experience was later dramatized in the movie 'Lorenzo's Oil'. 'Another example is provided by Elaine Gottschall, whose daughter was diagnosed with severe ulcerative colitis. Medications failed to improve the child's condition, and most doctors dismissed the idea that diet could be in any way associated with this digestive disease. It was a maverick doctor who thought 'outside the box' who finally led Ms Gottschall to a treatment for her daughter. Prayer is the theme uniting verses James 5:13-18. This section teaches that vital relationships with God grow out of intimacy with Him in prayer. We are invited to share all life's experiences with Him. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. This implies that the ministry to the sick is not limited to apostles, or even to those with gifts of healing as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:30. James' counsel has permanent validity in the church. However, this is the only mention of anointing a sick person in the New Testament letters.