

## **A HEALING CHURCH**

Acts 5: 12-16, James 5: 14-17

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In 1982 Pastor Gary Folds was on his way to a preaching point in southern Tanzania. He was a member of a short term mission team from the United States. Before he and the translator arrived at the place where he was to preach, they were stopped by a large crowd. Inquiring what they desired, the translator said that two men in their village were desperately ill. Could they stop and provide medical treatment. Pastor Folds explained that he was not a doctor, but that he would go the village and pray for the two men. Praying by the bedside of these two men, he realized that both were gravely ill. One, in fact, was at death's door. Pastor Folds prayed earnestly and told the men that they would be remembered in the prayers of the people later that night at the meeting. He and the translator then got back in their jeep and drove to the open air service. Half way through the sermon, there was a noisy commotion at the back of the gathering. They stopped the service and inquired as to what was going on. The two men for whom Pastor Folds had prayed were standing among the awestruck crowd. Both had been completely healed.

From the earliest days of the Christian Church, healing was an important part of its life and ministry. Filled with the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter healed the crippled beggar a few days later on his way to the Temple. Later it was his prayers that raised Tabitha from the dead, a woman who had devoted her life to doing good and helping the poor. Even Peter's shadow falling upon the sick was seen as a sign for the potential healing of those who were ill. Later during the missionary journeys of Paul, he too was blessed with the power to heal. We are told in the book of Acts that "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them" (Acts 19:11-12).

Without a doubt, healing was a vitally important ministry of the early church. It is for that reason that James provides us with these insights regarding healing. If anyone is sick, he encourages that person to seek out the elders, the spiritual leaders of the church. He then describes a plan of action that involves prayer, anointing with oil, faith and confession of sin. Let's take a look at each aspect of this healing process. The first, of course, is prayer. Prayer puts us in touch with the source of all healing, the presence and power of God. That is why James names the elders as the ones who should pray. Hopefully they are spiritually mature Christians who can ask for and receive permission to be the channel through whom God's healing presence flows into the life of the afflicted individual. God is the one who heals. We are merely the ones through which that healing makes its way into the life of

another person. A plaque in a hospital I visited years ago forcefully declared, "We dress the wound. God heals the wound."

Anointing a sick person with oil is something which seems a bit strange in our day and time. Administering medications falls within the realm of doctors, not elders or spiritual leaders in a church. What did the anointing signify? In the first century it was frequently the only medicine available. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan dressed the wounds of the man who had been beaten and robbed with oil and wine (Luke 10:34). Oil, probably something like olive oil, was the antiseptic cream of the ancient world and it very well may possess some curative properties. But there is more to this than just applying a soothing lotion. When David was chosen to be the king of Israel, Samuel, Israel's last and greatest judge, anointed him with oil. This is what the Scriptures tell us, "So Samuel took a horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power" (1 Samuel 16:13). The anointing was a declaration of God's blessings and empowerment. The same holds true with regards to healing. Anointing with oil expresses the desire to experience God's blessings and to access His life giving empowerment.

The third thing that James mentions in this portion of his letter is faith. Faith is believing that God can and will do something to help us. It is a vitally important part of the healing process. Jesus was well aware of that fact. On more than one occasion He asked those who desired to be healed if they had faith in His ability to make them well. Without faith His ability to heal was severely limited. When He visited His home town of Nazareth that is precisely what took place. The people were offended when Jesus spoke in their synagogue and doubted the source of His wisdom and miraculous powers. Commenting on this incident Mark tells us in his Gospel, "He (Jesus) could not do any miracles there, except to lay His hands on a few sick people and heal them. And He was amazed at their lack of faith" (Mark 6:5-6). Faith was crucial to healing. The same is true even with regards to modern day medicine. If a person does not believe their doctor, the successful prognosis is doubtful.

Lastly, James talks about confessing our sins to one another. He says, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Now to be perfectly honest, how many of us have associated sinfulness with healing? When someone comes down with an illness, we don't ask that person, "Alright what sin have you committed that needs to be confessed?" However, once again if we examine the healing ministry of Jesus, we will discover that He not only healed people, but that at least on one occasion included forgiveness of sin as a prerequisite for healing. When some men brought a paralytic to Jesus, a man who could not walk, He said to the man, "Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). Having served as a pastor for many years, I have seen on more than one occasion that unconfessed sin is like a cancerous tumor embedded in a person's life. In today's world, many people don't like to even hear the word "sin," especially if it might have something to do with how they are living.

Nevertheless, there are times when we need to find a trusted friend and confess a sin that is standing in the way of our emotional and even our physical well-being.

Having taken a look at what James has said in these concluding verses of his letter, what conclusions can we draw for our own day and time. First of all, healing is still a valid ministry for God's people. Yes, there have been excesses, especially in various TV ministries over the years and in Protestant congregations there has been a real reluctance to follow the guidelines provided by James in his letter. Every Sunday we pray for people who are ill, but rarely do we follow that up with an anointing or any of the other things that James says. That's a shame because when we fail to follow James' inspired counsel, we become like a doctor only prescribing a small portion of what is needed for genuine recovery.

Second, healing involves more than just our physical well-being. It involves the sum total of who we are—body, soul and spirit. Writing to the Christians in Thessalonica Paul concluded his letter with these words, "May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Here's what he is saying. You are a soul, a living being filled with a whole host of thoughts and feelings, residing in a human body that was made spiritually alive when you became a Christian. When your life here on earth comes to an end, your spirit will become the new vessel for your soul so that the sum total of who you are will be welcomed into the presence of Christ. But what does that mean with regarding to healing. It means that there are times when our bodies, our minds and our emotions, as well as our spirits need healing. When a person receives Christ as their Lord and Savior, they have experienced spiritual healing. When a person seeks pastoral care for a mental or emotional issue that is troubling them, they are seeking healing for their souls. When we pray with a person who is physically ill that too is a part of the healing that Christ offers unto us.

Finally, healing does not always come in the way that we wish, but it does come directly and personally from the hand of God. Let me share an example with you. The children of one of the members of the church I was serving years ago came to me in a state of panic. Their mother was beside herself in anguish and all-consuming fear. She had just been diagnosed with cancer. The doctors had told her it was incurable. I visited with her and we prayed for her physical healing, but I also told her there were some other kinds of healing she needed to experience, emotional healing and spiritual healing. She needed to calm down so that she could experience the peace of God. No matter what happened she needed to know beyond a shadow of doubt that the Lord would take care of her and would also watch over her family. That's what we prayed for and that prayer was answered. The other prayer for physical healing was not. But fortunately she came to the place in her life where she could accept that decision. She slipped away into eternity

with the assurance of God's love watching over and protecting her, which is, of course, the greatest and the most wonderful kind of healing that we will ever experience.