



# Truth Matters

*A Publication Discussing Matters Related To Truth Because Truth Matters*

Scripture Reading  
Week of  
June 26<sup>th</sup> - July 2<sup>nd</sup>



Monday

- ❖ 1Chronicles 9, 10
- ❖ Psalm 119:57-64
- ❖ Romans 9

Tuesday

- ❖ 1Chronicles 11, 12
- ❖ Psalm 119:65-72
- ❖ Romans 10

Wednesday

- ❖ 1Chronicles 13, 14
- ❖ Psalm 119:73-80
- ❖ Romans 11

Thursday

- ❖ 1Chronicles 15, 16
- ❖ Psalm 119:81-88
- ❖ Romans 12

Friday

- ❖ 1Chronicles 17, 18
- ❖ Psalm 119:89-96
- ❖ Romans 13

Saturday

- ❖ 1Chronicles 19, 20

Sunday

- ❖ 1Chronicles 21, 22

## How to Pray Series

### *How to Pray for the Sick and Suffering*

I am hearing a recurring phrase more and more these days when I speak with people about their prayer life. The phrase is "I don't know how to pray." When we delve into the nuts and bolts of this phrase we often find that people mean they do not know what to pray. That is, they do not know what to say.

Prayer is certainly not a device of cleverly combined phrases; nor is prayer a type of ritual incantation; it is much more than these. Prayer is our heart crying out to God's heart. But in prayer we can come to think God's thoughts after him and to pray his heart after his. That means that because we have something of the mind and heart of God revealed for us in Scripture, we can know his mind and heart when it comes to prayer.

It is my aim in this series of articles to help us think through how we should pray for people when they fall into one of those often repeated categories. How should we pray for the sick and suffering? By that I mean what should we actually say in our prayers? How should we shape our prayers for the sick and suffering so that our prayers are in line with God's heart?

#### **Bring Prayer into Focus**

David Powlison gives a square assessment of our prayers for the sick when he writes, "Many times our prayer for the sick sounds more like a nursing report at a shift-change: 'The colon cancer in 103 with uncertain prognosis...the lady in 110 with the gall bladder not responding to treatment...the broken leg that mending well in 113...the heart patient going into surgery tomorrow is under Dr. Jones skilled hand...'"<sup>1</sup>

We usually pray as if physical healing is the sole goal of prayer. Prayer might be nothing more than requests for doctors, procedures, and medicines to be effective. That certainly is not wrong when that is not all we pray for. As people who embrace the sovereign goodness of God, we must learn to pray in such a way that we demonstrate a profound trust in his hand when his goodness is clouded by pain.

Prayer for the sick is a tremendous time for reminding ourselves and each other how to pray in the midst of pain.

Often our prayers for the sick have a disheartening and

distracting effect on the faith of God's people. That is due to our misuse of prayer. It often dulls our expectations of God or hypes up fantasy expectations. Prayers for sick people often breed cynicism - For the healed: "Wouldn't they have gotten better anyway once the medical treatment took its course?" - For those not healed: "Doesn't God care for me?" "Do I not have enough faith?"

Certainly, the Bible makes it clear through James that we are to pray for the sick and suffering. Consider James 5:13-18:

<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. <sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you sick? 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. <sup>15</sup> And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great

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power as it is working. <sup>17</sup> Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

I will save the detailed exegesis of this text and the conditional promises for another time. I simply want to put it in its context in the book of James and draw out some practical applications for our prayers.

First of all, this passage is the warrant for praying for the sick. Second, earnest prayer is described as affecting both the physical and the spiritual state of that person (and those involved). The letter of James is about growing in joy and wisdom: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trial of various kinds...If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God..." James is concerned that we would always respond with the right emotions (joy) and choices (wisdom / discernment) no matter what the circumstances. Now he illustrates it with regard to sickness. ***James wants us to understand that suffering presents us with an occasion for both joy and wisdom.***

#### Spiritual Dynamic

There are at least two dynamics that play out in the way God meets us in sickness. The first is that sickness, like any other weakness or trouble, can force us to stop and face ourselves, to stop and find the Lord.

- ❖ I may find sins I've been too busy to notice: irritability, neglect, indifference, self-indulgence, unbelief, joylessness, worry / anxiety, complaining / work-a-holic, self-sufficiency, etc.
- ❖ I may find my need for mercy strengthened.
- ❖ I may find my delight in God deepened.
- ❖ I may find that I developed fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

The second dynamic is that sickness, like

any other weakness or trouble, is itself a temptation. It is amazing what the experience of sickness can bring out of our heart. For example:

- ❖ Some people complain and grumble; getting grumpiest with the people who care most.
- ❖ Some get angry - at God, at themselves, at the inconvenience, at others.
- ❖ Some milk the illness to avoid responsibilities at home, work, school, etc.
- ❖ Some invest vast hopes in hopping from one doctor to another, book after book, diet after diet, cure after cure.
- ❖ Some find others to blame - even seeking to sue.
- ❖ Some ignore the reality and press on with life when God intends for them to stop and learn lessons of weakness.
- ❖ Some get deeply fearful - "Perhaps this is the big one!" They play video tapes in their minds of the future demise and funeral, etc.
- ❖ Some soak up all the extra pity and attention.
- ❖ Some plunge into over-indulgence with TV, games, food, reading, etc.
- ❖ Some get depressed.
- ❖ Some get too proud to ask for help or seek advice.
- ❖ Some manipulate so as to have others serve their every need.
- ❖ Some brood.

With these dynamics before us, we can see that sickness provides one of the richest opportunities imaginable for spiritual growth. Shouldn't our prayers for the sick and suffering reflect these realities?

#### The Big Picture:

Is God interested in healing any particular sickness? Sometimes! Sometimes not! But he is always interested in making us wise, holy, happy, dependent and loving, even in the context of our pain, disability and dying!

*God is sometimes pleased to heal in response to prayer.* Read Isaiah 38 this week in your prayer time and notice that

Hezekiah pleaded to God with tears for healing and was granted 15 more years to his life.

*God is sometimes pleased to not heal in response to prayer.* Read 2 Corinthians 12.1-10 and recall that the Apostle Paul prayed three times to be alleviated from his "thorn in the flesh" but God chooses rather to leave the affliction and to increase the measure of his grace. Also take notice that such action on the part of God was met with joy in Paul.

Consider King Asa who did not heed the spiritual design behind his suffering in 2 Chronicles 16:11-14. King Asa is chided for failing to respond in faith to his sickness, choosing rather to put his trust entirely in physicians.

#### Keep all Things in Balance:

Let's broadly categorize three types of prayer:

- ❖ **Circumstantial prayer** - asking God to change my circumstances ("Heal me and give me better days!").
- ❖ **Wisdom prayer** - asking God to change me ("Fulfill your sanctifying purposes!").
- ❖ **Kingdom prayer** - asking God to change everything by revealing himself ("Act for the sake of your glory, God!").

When any of these three get divorced from the others, prayer malfunctions. Sadly, however, much of our prayer resides entirely at the level of circumstantial prayer. If all we want is for God to change our circumstances, then we are acknowledging our contempt for God's divine design. Instead of resting in his sovereign goodness, we turn God into our errand boy who is to fill our shopping list of desires and pleasures. We pray for better days with no sanctifying purposes and no thought for higher glory.

If, on the other hand, we only pray for personal change, we tend to be consumed with moral self-improvement while detached from engaging with other people so as to fulfill the task of life. There is no desire for Christ to right all wrongs or to alleviate real sins and real tears.

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Still, however, if we only pray for the sweeping invasion of God's kingdom then our prayers tend toward irrelevance and over generalization (what John Piper calls "sweeping and insipid prayers") that fail to live out actual kingdom requirements of mercy justice and peace. I like what David Powlison says: "Such prayer pursues a God who never touches the ground until the last day."

#### **Summary:**

God designs sickness (and any weakness or trouble) into the life of his people so as to carry out a purpose. We do not want God to change the circumstances until he has completed his sanctifying and kingdom purposes. Be careful not to let prayer malfunction!

#### **Application:**

How then shall we pray? I suggest the following items and passages.

1. That they would be granted a heart of thanksgiving (Philippians 4:4-7; James 1:2)
2. That they would rely on God's grace and accept this trial as a part of his good plan (Romans 8:28-37; 2 Corinthians 1:8-10)
3. That they would be given strength for endurance (Romans 5:3-5; 1 Corinthians 10:13)
4. That they would be given healing (James 5:13-20)
5. That they would be given a hope that produces works of love (1 Peter 3:15)
6. That they would respond in obedience bringing about their sanctification and further transformation (James 1:2-4)
7. That they would be comforted (2 Corinthians 1:3-7)
8. That they would be given an eternal perspective (Romans 8:18-25)

We will continue next week with another category.