

## Malcolm's Monday Musings : 3 March 2025

Greetings.

At my home assembly, we recently concluded a series of talks on the Epistle of James.

Although I was not responsible for speaking on the closing section (James 5. 13-20), I was reminded that I had attempted to expound that passage elsewhere some time before.

I have decided that, this week, I will share with you the notes (updated and revised) which I used then. Hence, **the document below**, which includes (possibly, for the more studiously inclined) over four and a half pages of extensive notes.

A week yesterday marked the anniversary of the traditional date of the martyrdom of Polycarp, on 23 February in 155 AD—Polycarp being probably the last surviving person to have known an apostle personally, having been a disciple of the apostle John.

A quotation from one of Polycarp's letters features in two (numbers '24' and '86') of those 'extensive notes'.

'The document which gives an account of Polycarp's martyrdom is in the form of a letter addressed by the Church of Smyrna to the Church of Philomelium. The letter seems to have been written shortly after the martyrdom itself' (J. B. Lightfoot's introduction to his translation of '*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*').

The following is a memorable extract from paragraph 9 of the Smyrna letter:

*'When (Polycarp) was brought before him, the proconsul enquired whether he were the man. And on his confessing that he was, he tried to persuade him to a denial saying, "Have respect to your age", and other such things, as it is their wont to say; "Swear by the genius of Caesar ...". When the magistrate pressed him hard and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile the Christ", Polycarp said, "Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"*

Following which, 'the glorious martyr Polycarp' was bound to a stake, burned alive and finally stabbed with a dagger.

Here now are **seven brief 'tasters'** from the attached document:

(i) When the battle is at its hottest, hang on in there and call for air support.

(ii)

In every joy that crowns my days,  
In every pain I bear,  
My heart shall find delight in praise,  
Or seek relief in prayer.

(iii) Daniel in sackcloth and ashes exerted more real power than King Cyrus on his throne.

(iv) Spirit-prompted prayer is the means of accomplishing God's will and programme and not of altering God's will and programme.

(v) Prayer is the means, not of getting the will of man done in heaven but of getting the will of God done on earth.

(vi) The Lord isn't constrained by the words we pray; He is well able to bypass what is on our lips and respond to that which is in our hearts.

(vii) Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscles of omnipotence.

Finally, **an advance notice**. Given the size of this week's main 'Musings' document below, I shall reduce the size of the 'Musings' which, God willing, I shall circulate next Monday.

Happy reading.

Yours in our Lord Jesus,

Malcolm

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# THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

## Chapter 5, verses 13-20

**SCRIPTURE** (The New King James Version).

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms (or 'sing praise'<sup>1</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. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. (More literally, 'The prayer of a righteous man is very powerful in its effects'.)

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly ('prayed fervently') that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back ('converts him'), let him know that he who turns back ('converts') a sinner from the error of his way (better, 'from his wandering') will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

### INTRODUCTION

The reader can hardly miss noting that this short reading (of just eight verses) is positively bristling with words and expressions, the meaning and interpretation of which are (to say the least) not immediately obvious.<sup>2</sup>

No doubt, many will know of Martin Luther's famous description of James's epistle as 'an epistle of straw' in comparison with the majority of the books of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> And I guess that any speaker who is told that he has been allotted the passage we have just read could be said to have *drawn the short straw!*

For what it is worth, I see our passage, not, as many do, as a series of disconnected parts but as one whole, held together, as I hope to show, by two threads—the more obvious being the subject of prayer and the less obvious (but no less real) being the subject of God's chastisement on the believer who sins, whether that sin is committed against another believer or consists of wandering away from God and His truth.

In support of my view that the passage is to be viewed as one single piece, I point to the way that it is bound together by the expression, 'anyone among you', which opens both the first section (occurring twice in verses 13 and 14) and the last section (occurring as it does in verse 19).

I describe the one thread (that of prayer) as being fairly 'obvious' because direct mention is made of prayer in every verse from verse 13 to verse 18.<sup>4</sup>

I have seen these two sections together neatly headed as saying, 'When the battle is at its hottest, hang on in there and call for air support'. I like that.

In our passage, we find the individual praying,<sup>5</sup> the elders praying,<sup>6</sup> other believers praying<sup>7</sup> and the prophet praying.<sup>8</sup>

I shall draw attention to the 'less obvious' thread of God's dealings by way of chastisement and discipline in the life of the sinning believer as we make our way through the passage.

In the earlier part of his epistle, James places considerable emphasis on the use of the tongue—that small but immensely powerful part of the body.<sup>9</sup> And, in one sense, his closing exhortations (from verse 7 onwards) return to that subject.

Your tongue, James is saying, shouldn't be used for complaining about or against others,<sup>10</sup> nor for uttering careless and profane oaths.<sup>11</sup> It should rather be used to further our communion with God—whatever chequered human experiences we face.<sup>12</sup> One commentator expresses it beautifully, '*Our whole life ... should be so angled towards God that whatever strikes upon us, whether sorrow or joy, should be deflected upwards at once into His presence*'.<sup>13</sup>

## EXPOSITION

### Verse 13.

Times when we suffer trouble or distress should drive us to prayer,<sup>14</sup> and times when we are joyful in spirit should find their outlet in singing songs of praise.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century hymn writer, Helen Williams, captured the thought well:

In *every joy* that crowns my days,  
In *every pain* I bear,  
My heart shall *find delight in praise*,  
Or *seek relief in prayer*.<sup>15</sup>

There is no problem in understanding any of that; in practising it, maybe, but not in understanding it.

Ah, but then comes 'is anyone ... Let him' number three!<sup>16</sup> 'In this case, however, the believer who is ill is not commanded to pray but to summon the elders of the church so that they might pray'.<sup>17</sup>

### Verses 14-15.

'Is anyone among you sick', James says<sup>18</sup>—the word rendered, 'sick',<sup>19</sup> being translated, 'weak,' fifteen times out of the nineteen occasions it occurs in the letters of the New Testament.<sup>20</sup> This may well indicate that the illness in view has left the sick person weak and frail.

This suggestion is supported:

(i) by the fact that the sick person needs to summon the elders to visit him, rather than to go and see them;<sup>21</sup>

(ii) by the way in which the elders are said to 'pray over' (an expression found nowhere else in the New Testament) the sick person;

(iii) by the (different) word used in verse 15, which itself carries the idea, 'without strength, 'feeble', 'exhausted';<sup>22</sup> and

(iv) by the outcome envisaged—that, in response to the elders' prayers, the Lord will 'raise him up'.<sup>23</sup>

'Let him call for the elders of the church,<sup>24</sup> and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick'. For my comments on the expressions, '*anointing ... with oil*' and '*the prayer of faith*', see note<sup>25</sup>.

'And if he has committed sins',<sup>26</sup> James adds in verse 15, 'he will be forgiven'—more literally, 'it will be forgiven him'. The implication is that there are cases, and clearly not a few, where the strength-sapping illness is the direct result of some personal sin or sins.<sup>27</sup>

I hardly need point out that this is by no means always (or even usually) true in the case of sickness. Indeed, we have only to recall the case of Job (which includes, of course, his horrendous illness<sup>28</sup>), to which James has referred only four verses earlier—in verse 11. For, as everyone who has read the book which carries Job's name knows well—in spite of the view expressed *ad nauseam* by his supposed 'friends'—the explanation for Job's many sufferings lay elsewhere than in any grave personal sin(s) on his part.<sup>29</sup>

And yet, there *are* times (and it is these which James has in mind) when sickness does come as an expression and manifestation of God's chastisement and discipline on a believer on account of that believer's sin or sins.

One well-known passage which makes just such a connection comes towards the close of the section of 1 Corinthians 11 which focuses on 'the Lord's supper'.<sup>30</sup>

I refer, of course, to verses 29 and 30: 'he who eats and drinks without discerning the body<sup>31</sup> eats and drinks *judgment* to himself. For this cause, many among you are sick ('weak'<sup>32</sup>) and infirm, and a number have fallen asleep ('have died', that is)'. 'When we are judged', the apostle explains further, 'we are chastened ('disciplined') by the Lord'.<sup>33</sup>

It is clear, then, from both Paul and James, that there *are* cases when sickness—and even physical death—can represent God’s chastisement upon a believer as a result of that believer’s personal sins.

But, as I say, this is far from being the usual case—in which sickness is simply part and parcel of our lot as living in a fallen world. And I note that, whereas in *John 5* our Lord makes it clear that the man at the pool of Bethesda was sick as a consequence of some sin in his life (hence His words to him following his healing, ‘Sin no more, that nothing worse happen to you’<sup>34</sup>), in *John 9* our Lord makes it equally clear that neither the ‘man blind from birth’ nor his parents had committed any sin to bring his affliction upon him.<sup>35</sup>

But, in our passage, James does envisage that the man who has called for the elders may well have committed sins which gave rise to his illness—in which case, James says, the man needs (and receives), not only the Lord’s healing touch but also the Lord’s forgiveness<sup>36</sup>—the man’s own confession of his sins and his repentance being assumed.

### Verse 16.

As I understand it, James then continues (and I paraphrase the first half of verse 16):

‘For that reason,<sup>37</sup> any brother who is taken ill and whose conscience tells him that his sickness is the result of God’s chastening hand upon him—in all likelihood, in the context here, on account of sins committed against another believer—that such a brother should confess those sins; in all likelihood, I say again, to the believer who has been sinned against—to the end that the brother sinned against will then join the sick brother in prayer for his healing, which prayer God will then hear and the sick brother be healed’.

That is, I perceive that James has in mind some sickness which has not yet reached the serious (and extremely debilitating) stage which he envisages in verses 14 and 15, where the man is housebound and bedridden—in such a poor condition that he needs to summon the elders to come to him. ‘Prevent’, James would be saying, ‘by confession and prayer, the further progress of your illness before it reaches that critical stage’.<sup>38</sup>

James then concludes with an assertion about the power and the effectiveness of prayer—in the context, I suspect, the power and effectiveness of intercession in bringing healing and forgiveness; but always, as James makes clear, on the condition that the person praying is ‘a *righteous*’ person ... one living, that is, an upright and consistent Christian life—one who doesn’t cherish sin in his heart<sup>39</sup> and who, therefore, has a clear sky over his head as far as God is concerned.

### Verse 17.

And it is at this point that James suddenly introduces Elijah into his sermon.

And I suggest that, if we are to grasp what James is saying throughout our passage, it is important that we understand *why it is* that James cites Elijah’s example as he does.

Personally, I don’t think it is enough to say it was (i) because Elijah was the kind of ‘righteous man’ whom James has just mentioned or (ii) because, ordinary man as Elijah was, his prayers achieved the most extraordinary results and that he, therefore, serves as a great encouragement for us in our prayer lives.<sup>40</sup> Please don’t misunderstand me, I believe all of that to be true. But I am convinced there is more to it.

For what, I might ask, by way of example only, about the prayers of (say) Joshua<sup>41</sup> or Isaiah?<sup>42</sup> Though praying for different reasons, the cries of both these men moved God to interfere with the rays of the sun? Were the effects of such prayers not, at the very least, as spectacular as the effects of Elijah’s?

I suggest that James selects Elijah as his ‘prayer model’ because of *the relevance of Elijah’s situation to the subject with which James is dealing*—namely, (i) with God’s chastening of His people on account of their sins and (ii) with His withdrawal of His chastening hand once His discipline had its desired effects.

That is, I believe that James chooses Elijah for the simple reason that the prayers of Elijah played a key role at a time (some 900 years before James wrote) when God acted in the most dramatic way to discipline His sinning people.

Let me remind you that the drought for which Elijah prayed came because of—and only because of—the sin and waywardness of God’s people at the time. For, although the relevant Old Testament narrative in 1 Kings 17 doesn’t say so, James knew (and assures us) that Elijah had previously

prayed that God would do exactly as he notified King Ahab—when he delivers his long-range weather forecast to the effect that there would be neither dew nor rain for several years.<sup>43</sup>

And I have no doubt that James knew that Elijah had prayed, not only *fervently*,<sup>44</sup> but *biblically*—that Elijah had prayed in line with the known and revealed will of God.

For God had earlier explicitly forewarned His people that, if they ‘turned aside’ (if they ‘wandered’) from Him and from His truth and served and worshipped ‘other gods’,<sup>45</sup> He would chastise His people by shutting ‘up heaven that there be no rain, and the earth shall not yield its fruit’.<sup>46</sup> These godless conditions certainly prevailed in the days of Elijah,<sup>47</sup> triggering the kindling of the Lord’s anger and disciplinary judgment—and Elijah had prayed accordingly: ‘that it would not rain’.<sup>48</sup>

This is not to say that Elijah represents the first—or the last—example of *saints who prayed in line with the known will of God*.



### PRAYER AND THE WILL OF GOD

We might consider, for example:

#### Moses.

When the Lord informs Moses of Israel’s sin in connexion with the golden calf and proposes the destruction of the nation,<sup>49</sup> Moses pleads for the nation’s salvation, not only on the basis of (i) God’s relationship with the people<sup>50</sup> and (ii) God’s reputation in the eyes of the Egyptians,<sup>51</sup> but also on the basis of (iii) God’s revealed promise and oath<sup>52</sup> to the patriarchs: ‘Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, “I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever”’.<sup>53</sup>

Moses, that is, prayed commensurate with the known will and word of God.

#### David.

Through Nathan the prophet, the Lord promises David that He *would* build and establish David’s house and dynasty ‘for ever’.<sup>54</sup> In his prayer of response, David pleads, ‘Now, O Lord God, the word which you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, establish it forever and do as you have said ... let the house of your servant David be established before you. For you ... have revealed<sup>55</sup> to your servant, saying, “I will build you a house”. Therefore, your servant has found in his heart<sup>56</sup> to pray this prayer to you ... let it please you to bless the house of your servant, that it may be before you for ever; for you, O Lord God, have spoken it’.<sup>57</sup>

David, that is, based his prayer on that which God had made known to him of His purpose.

#### Daniel.

We need do little more than let the prophet speak for himself: ‘I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years specified by the word of the Lord through Jeremiah the prophet, that He would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. Then I ... prayed to the Lord my God, and made confession, and said, “O Lord, great and awesome God ... let your anger and your fury be turned away from your city Jerusalem ... cause your face to shine on your sanctuary, which is desolate’.<sup>58</sup>

Daniel’s prayer is prompted by a calculation based on the words of Jeremiah, principally, I believe, on Jeremiah’s words in chapter 29: ‘Thus says the Lord: “After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform my good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and go and pray to me, and ... I will be found by you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back from your captivity ... to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive”’.<sup>59</sup> We ought to note the Lord’s words, ‘Then you will call upon me and go and pray to me’. I suggest that Daniel certainly noted those words—and acted on them.

It is thrilling to reflect that Daniel in sackcloth and ashes<sup>60</sup> exerted more real power than King Cyrus on his throne!

Daniel reckons that the foretold ‘seventy years’ of desolation is expiring and that the time has come to expect the end of the captivity period with God’s blessing again upon both His ‘city’ and His

'sanctuary'.<sup>61</sup> And, knowing that heartfelt prayer<sup>62</sup> was what God was looking for, he prays accordingly ... in keeping with God's declared intention and purpose.

### The early church.

Herod Agrippa 1, the grandson of Herod the Great, an Idumean, was anxious to be esteemed a devout Jew. He therefore killed James with the sword and, when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to take Peter also. 'But prayer was made earnestly by the church to God for him'.

Yet, earlier, the Lord had clearly referred to Peter's reaching old age: 'when you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go'.<sup>63</sup> This was understood as indicating the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.<sup>64</sup> There is no reason to doubt that those words of the Lord Jesus to Peter circulated widely among the saints, as we know did the misunderstanding about His coincident saying concerning the apostle John.<sup>65</sup>

And yet, doubtless knowing what the Lord Jesus had said, the church still prays.<sup>66</sup> Although we cannot fault their earnestness, their expectation leaves a little to be desired. For, whereas they had prayed hard and long for Peter's release, they were more ready to believe that it was an angel at the door than that it was Peter.<sup>67</sup> It has been well said that Peter found it more difficult to get into the prayer meeting than he did out of the prison!<sup>68</sup> They prayed in line with our Lord's well-known word.

Oh yes, Elijah, along with Moses, David, Daniel and the early church, could testify that prayer itself forms an integral part of God's purpose and will—that the God who appoints the ends appoints the means also.<sup>69</sup> Assuredly, the true goal of prayer is not to alter or to amend God's programme but to achieve and to fulfil it.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach this plainly:

(i) The Old Testament. The prophet Ezekiel records the words of God, 'Thus says the Lord God ... "I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt ... then the nations that are left round about you shall know that I the Lord build the ruined places, and plant that which was desolate: I the Lord have spoken it, and I will do it". Thus says the Lord God, "I will yet be inquired of by the house of Israel; to do it for them"; I will increase them with men like a flock".<sup>70</sup>

(ii) The New Testament. The apostle John writes, 'This is the confidence we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us; and if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petition which we asked of Him'.<sup>71</sup>

Scripture, that is, represents Spirit-prompted prayer<sup>72</sup> as the means of accomplishing God's will and purpose and not of altering God's will and purpose.<sup>73</sup>

In brief, prayer is the means, not of getting the will of man done in heaven but of getting the will of God done on earth.<sup>74</sup>



## **BACK NOW TO JAMES 5**

### **Verse 18.**

The digression over, we note James's further comment that Elijah 'prayed again' and that, this time, his prayer brings blessing and healing to the land<sup>75</sup>—when 'the heaven gave rain,<sup>76</sup> and the earth produced its fruit'.

But when did this happen, pray? Not until the people who had earlier 'turned aside' from God and His truth had first repented and confessed Him to be the true God.<sup>77</sup>

### **Verses 19-20.**

Now to the closing verses of James 5.<sup>78</sup>

Do you not see the connection? ... that James envisages a believer who has begun to 'wander' (to 'turn aside') from God's truth<sup>79</sup>—the very sin which had exposed Israel to God's chastening hand in the days of Elijah.<sup>80</sup>

And I note that James uses twice<sup>81</sup> a word rendered 'turns back' ('converts')<sup>82</sup> which is closely akin to that which the Greek Old Testament uses<sup>83</sup> when speaking of Israel's repentance and return from their

'wandering' ('you have *turned* their hearts *back*'<sup>84</sup>)—albeit, sadly, that 'conversion' proved to be short-lived.

That is, in his closing words, James wants his readers to 'know'<sup>85</sup> that:

(i) *if*, by their caring and careful action (backed, of course, by their Elijah-like prayer), they<sup>86</sup> actively pursue one of God's people,<sup>87</sup> who, unlike the sick man of verse 14, is not seeking any support or prayer from the elders of the church but who (as Israel in Elijah's day) has sinned in turning aside from the truth, and

(ii) *if* they succeed in 'turning him back' (as the 'hearts' of the Israel of Elijah's day were 'turned back'<sup>88</sup>),

then they would:

(iii) 'save', not (as was the case with the believing prayer of the elders for the sinful sick man of verse 15) the man's body by way of healing some sickness which had befallen him under God's chastening hand but 'save' him<sup>89</sup> rather from that which (according to 1 Corinthians 11 verse 30) is the ultimate and extreme form of God's chastisement and discipline—death itself (from physical death, that is), and

(iv) secure the man's 'forgiveness'—which is how (in accord with 'Old Testament usage where the biblical writers describe sin as covered, when forgiven'<sup>90</sup>) I understand the expression 'cover (or 'hide') a multitude of sins'—again, as in verse 15, assuming the man's confession and repentance.

(I suspect that you may well need to ponder that paragraph again.)

And so, as I said at the outset, I see our passage, not as a set of disconnected parts but as one whole—held together by two threads, (i) the one being prayer and (ii) the other being God's chastisement on the believer who sins and who wanders away from God and His truth.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS ON PRAYER

Yes indeed, one of the threads which holds our passage together is that of prayer. We are told that, both in the case of the elders and of Elijah, their *very specific* prayers were answered by God *exactly* as they had asked Him.<sup>91</sup>

But it is important that we realize that it is not always so ... that *the Lord isn't constrained by the words we pray; He is well able to bypass what is on our lips and respond to that which is in our hearts.*

Take the following two examples:

### (i) Augustine of Hippo.

The so-called Church Father, Augustine, lived in Carthage in North Africa but, as an immoral and heretical young man, was allured by the attractions of Rome. His Christian mother, Monica, who longed passionately for Augustine's conversion, did all she could to persuade Augustine not to go—following him even to the harbour. But he deceived her and set sail at night for Rome.

From Rome, Augustine moved to Milan, where (largely as a result of the preaching and influence of godly Bishop Ambrose) he was converted.

In his 'Confessions', written long after, Augustine records the events of the night of his departure for Rome:

'That night I slipped away secretly, and she (his mother) remained to pray and weep. And what was it, O Lord, that she was asking of you in such a flood of tears but that you would not allow me to sail. But *you*, in the depths of your counsels and hearing the main point of her desire, *regarded not what she then asked, that you might make me what she had always been asking.*'<sup>92</sup>

And, often, you and I are at our most effective in prayer when we simply tell God what is on our hearts and resist the temptation to dictate to Him precisely how He must go about granting our requests.

### (ii) The apostle Paul.

According to 2 Corinthians 12, some fourteen years previous to his writing the letter, 'a thorn in the flesh was given to' the apostle, 'a messenger of Satan to buffet' him—that 'thorn' clearly being some affliction intended by the devil to harass Paul and to hamper his work for the Lord. Understandably, at the time, he had pleaded with the Lord three times to remove the thorn.<sup>93</sup> The context makes it clear that Paul's *underlying* concern at that moment was his continued usefulness in the Lord's work.

And, as the apostle could see with hindsight, his thorn in the flesh and his consequent weakness had kept him humble those fourteen years before ('lest', as he now wrote, 'I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations') and thereby maintained him in a condition of soul in which God could continue to use him in His service ... that very thorn being used by the Lord to prick the balloon of this converted Pharisee's<sup>94</sup> pride.

And so, in the event, the Lord granted Paul the desire of his heart by leaving the thorn where it was and by supplying him with the necessary grace and strength to continue serving Him with the thorn.<sup>95</sup> I repeat what I said earlier, that 'the Lord isn't constrained by the words we pray' and that 'He is well able to bypass what is on our lips and respond to that which is in our hearts'.

Sandwiched between the cases of (i) the elders<sup>96</sup> and (ii) Elijah,<sup>97</sup> to which I have referred, we are confronted by James's assertion that 'the prayer of a righteous man<sup>98</sup> is very powerful in its effects'.

And I want to close with two non-biblical quotations concerning prayer—quotations which come from two men whose lives ran more or less concurrently through most of the nineteenth century.

The first, from Alfred, Lord Tennyson (among the last words which the Poet Laureate put into the mouth of mortally wounded King Arthur), 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of'.<sup>99</sup>

And the second from the English poet and novelist, Martin Tupper. I began with a quotation from *Martin* Luther and I close with a quotation from this other *Martin*, namely, that

**'Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscles of omnipotence'**.<sup>100</sup>

What a staggering thought ...  
and incentive to pray!



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The word translated, 'sing psalms', is 'properly used of playing on a stringed instrument ... we find it also used of singing with the voice and with the heart, Eph. 5. 19; 1 Cor. 14. 15. The word is only used of sacred music in the New Testament', J. B. Mayor, '*The Epistle of James*', page 156.

<sup>2</sup> 'This brief passage is remarkably full of difficult problems. Virtually every verse either evinces interpretive difficulties or raises complex theological questions', D. G. McCartney, '*James: Baker Exegetical Commentary*', comment on James 5. 13-18.

<sup>3</sup> In his Preface to the early editions of his translation of the New Testament, Martin Luther wrote: 'From all this you can now judge all the books and decide, among them which are the best. John's Gospel and St. Paul's Epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books. They ought rightly be the first books and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most, and by daily reading, make them as familiar as his daily bread.

In them you find not many works and miracles of Christ described, but you do find it depicted, in masterly fashion, how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the Gospel, as you have heard.

If I had to do without one or the other—either the works or preaching of Christ—I would rather do without His works than His preaching; for the works do not help me, but His words give life, as He Himself says. Now John writes very little about the works of Christ, but very much about His preaching, while the other Evangelists write much of His works and little of His preaching; therefore, John's Gospel is the one, tender, true chief Gospel, far, far to be preferred to the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the Epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore *St. James' Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them*; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it'.

This quotation can be accessed at [https://godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther\\_f8.htm](https://godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther_f8.htm)—at the close under the heading '*Preface to the New Testament 1545 (1522)*'.

Clearly, in context, Martin Luther did not call James's epistle, 'an epistle of straw' as though the epistle was of no value or as though it should be excluded from the New Testament canon. *He designated it 'an epistle of straw' only in comparison with the central 'Gospel' books* there. Elsewhere he wrote, '*I praise it and consider it a good book*, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God'—quoted in '*Martin Luther: Word and Sacrament I*' (edited by E. T. Bachmann), 1960, page 395.

<sup>4</sup> The seven mentions of prayer in verses 13-18 match the seven mentions of patient waiting and endurance in the passage immediately before (verses 7 to 12): 'patience/patiently' in verses 7 (twice), 8 and 10; 'waiting' in verse 7; and 'endure' in verse 11 (twice).

<sup>5</sup> James 5. 13.

<sup>6</sup> James 5. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> James 5. 16.

<sup>8</sup> James 5. 17-18.

<sup>9</sup> James 1. 26; 3. 5-6, 8.

<sup>10</sup> 'Do not grumble against one another', James 5. 9.

<sup>11</sup> 'Do not swear', James 5. 12.

<sup>12</sup> 'Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms', James 5. 13.

<sup>13</sup> J. Alec Motyer, '*The Tests of Faith*', pages 112-113.

<sup>14</sup> 'Any concern too small to be turned into a prayer is too small to be made into a burden', Corrie Ten Boom, '*Clippings from My Notebook*', page 21. 'The present tense denotes repeated prayer: "they should keep on praying about it"', C. A. Vlachos, '*James: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*', comment on James 5. 13.

'This was a command that James personally lived out as evidenced by his own body, for the ancient historian Eusebius testified that "his knees grew hard like a camel's because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people"', R. Kent Hughes, '*James: Preaching the Word*', comment on James 5. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Helen Maria Williams (1762-1827), 'While Thee I seek, protecting Power', written in 1786.

<sup>16</sup> 'James brings up three conditions: suffering, cheerfulness, and sickness', S. McKnight, '*The Letter of James: The New International Commentary*', page 432.

<sup>17</sup> G. J. Moo, '*James: Tyndale New Testament Commentary*', comment on James 5. 14.

<sup>18</sup> James 5. 14.

<sup>19</sup> The Greek word, 'ἀσθενέω'.

<sup>20</sup> In the King James Version.

<sup>21</sup> 'That the sick person calls for, rather than goes to, the elders may imply that the individual is bed-ridden', C. A. Vlachos, *ibid.*, comment on James 5. 14.

<sup>22</sup> The Greek word 'κάμνω'; see, for example, W. E. Vine, '*An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*', article 'Sick, Sickly, Sickness, A. Verbs. 2'.

<sup>23</sup> The same verb as is used, for example, in Matt. 8. 15; 9. 5-7, 25; Mark 9. 27; Acts 3. 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> Compare the words of Polycarp (69-155 AD): 'the presbyters ('overseers') also must be compassionate ... visiting all the infirm, not neglecting a widow or an orphan or a poor man', Polycarp, '*To the Philippians*', Paragraph 6. 1.

<sup>25</sup> What are we to understand by the anointing with oil? Frankly, I don't know. As I see it, there are three main possible interpretations of what James says.

**1.** First, that the oil is to be understood as having medical properties. There can be no doubt that, in biblical times, oil (particularly olive oil) was both (i) widely used and (ii) highly esteemed as a remedy for many ailments. This is easily proved by reference, not only to the standard textbooks of both Greek and Roman medical authorities [**Note A** following] and to Jewish literature [**Note B** following], but to the text of scripture itself—in both Old and New Testaments (Isa. 1. 6; Luke 10. 34). That is, the idea in James 5 would be that the elders were using a familiar natural means of healing in dependence on God—praying that He would use the therapeutic aid to restore the man to his former health and strength [**Note C** following].

While very much agreeing that the Christian should battle against illness with a combination of medication and prayer, I have a real problem with this interpretation in that nobody in the ancient world was so naïve as to believe that oil (of any kind) was a panacea for every illness, or that its application was always the most appropriate treatment. I note that James does not restrict the procedure of verse 14 to only some kinds of sickness; 'is anyone among you sick' are his words.

**2.** Second, that the anointing functioned, as sometimes in the Old Testament, to mark out somebody as set apart as the object of God's blessing [**Note D** following]. That is, that the oil was employed as a symbol of God's favour, as it may well have been by the twelve apostles when they healed 'many who were sick' miraculously (Mark 6. 13). But I note that, in James 5, 'the prayer of faith' takes the place of the miracles wrought by the apostles in Mark 6, where 'they' are credited with both the anointing and the healing.

**3.** Third, that to anoint (a very general word here, covering, in some contexts, even the ideas of smearing or daubing [**Note E** following]) one's body was the normal practice in the Near East for a healthy, happy person. There the oil would be applied as something refreshing and beneficial and as that which would protect the skin from blistering under the sun's burning rays. If somebody was unwell or in mourning—and therefore took no interest in their appearance—they would either (i) *deliberately not* or (ii) *simply not bother* to anoint themselves [**Note F** following].

It is possible therefore that, by anointing the incapacitated man with oil, the elders were expressing their faith that he would shortly be 'up and about' again and able to get on with normal life—which explanation would, of course, tally well with James's description of their prayer as a 'prayer of faith' and with his attributing the man's healing to that prayer alone—making no mention of any healing properties in the oil [**Note G** following].

But, while favouring this (the third interpretation), as I said, 'I don't know'.

#### **Note A.**

(i) 'If there be pains in the head, it is proper to apply oil... if the tongue is dry ... it is to be anointed with a mixture of oil and honey', Aulus Cornelius *Celsus* (25 BC to 57 AD), a Roman physician and medical historian, '*Of Medicine*', chapter 10.

(ii) The so-called father of modern medicine, *Hippocrates*, recommended olive oil to treat skin abrasions.

(iii) A second-century physician, Galen, described oil as "the best of all remedies for paralysis", '*Method of Medicine*', Book II.

(iv) *Pliny* devoted no less than 17 paragraphs (Book 23, paragraphs 34-50) in his '*Natural History*' to the medicinal properties of oil.

#### **Note B.**

(i) Concerning Herod the Great ... "the physicians thought proper to bathe his whole body in warm oil, by letting it down into a large vessel full of oil", Flavius Josephus, '*Wars of the Jews*', Book 1, Chapter 33, Paragraph 5.

(ii) 'One who has pains in his loins must not rub them with wine or vinegar, but may anoint them with oil', '*The Mishna, Shabbath*', Chapter 14, Paragraph 4.

(iii) 'Anointing on the Sabbath is permitted. If his head ache, or if a scall (?) comes upon it, he anoints it with oil', '*The Jerusalem Talmud: Maasar Shenit*', 5. 3. 3.

(iv) 'Why need we seek for more in the way of ointment than the juice pressed out of the fruit of the olive? For that softens the limbs, and relieves the labour of the body, and produces a good condition of the flesh; and if anything has got relaxed or flabby, it binds it again, and makes it firm and solid, and it fills us with vigour and strength of muscle', Philo, '*Dreams*', Book 2, Paragraph 58.

**Note C.** Compare the following comment on Mark 6. 13: 'The position of the disciples was not that of men trusting in charms ... but rather those who used simple natural means of healing in dependence

<sup>26</sup> 'I would translate: "And if he be a person who is in the state of having sinned"', S. McKnight, *ibid.*, page 444.

<sup>27</sup> 'The plural suggests repeated instances', C. A. Vlachos, *ibid.*, comment on James 5. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Job 2. 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> See Job 1. 6 - 2. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Paul uses the actual expression, ‘the Lord’s supper’, in verse 20.

<sup>31</sup> That is, both (i) without recognizing the bread and the wine as symbols of the Lord’s own body and (ii) partaking of the one bread without recognizing it as a symbol of the unity of the church. See, further, my ‘*Studies in First Corinthians*’, Precious Seed Publications, pages 114-116, 124-126.

<sup>32</sup> The word (‘*ἀσθενής*’) is akin to that used here in James 5. 14.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Cor. 11. 32.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “Behold, you are made whole. *Sin no more lest a worse thing happen to you*”’, John 5. 14; cf. ‘Jesus said to the paralytic, “Son, *your sins are forgiven*”’, Mark 2. 5.

<sup>35</sup> John 9. 1-3.

<sup>36</sup> ‘The elders were to be summoned for a twofold purpose: (1) that they might pray over the sick person and (2) that they might anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The result anticipated is also twofold: (1) the prayer of faith shall save (bodily heal, that is) the sick, and (2) ‘if he have committed sins he will be forgiven’, E. C. S. Gibson, ‘*James: The Pulpit Commentary*’, page 70. Compare the linking of restored health and forgiveness: ‘the inhabitant shall not say, “I am sick”; the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity’, Isa. 33. 24.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Therefore’ (‘*οὖν*’), as verse 16 properly begins.

<sup>38</sup> The only alternative explanation I can suggest for the ‘*therefore*’ of verse 16 is that James is now saying that, if believing prayer (that of the elders) proves effective for healing, even if a sickness is the result of personal sins, then the same approach of confessing such sins (this time to another believer—in all likelihood the one sinned against) will prove effective also.

<sup>39</sup> Psa. 66. 18; cf. Prov. 15. 29.

<sup>40</sup> See further, K. Warrington, ‘*Elijah*’, *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 66: 3, 1994, pages 217-227.

<sup>41</sup> Joshua 10. 12-14—noting especially the words ‘spoke to the Lord’, v. 12, and ‘the Lord hearkened to the voice of a man’, v. 14.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Isaiah the prophet cried out to the Lord, and He brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down on the sundial (or ‘steps’, as the Hebrew word is rendered in 1 Kings 10. 19-20) of Ahaz’, 2 Kings 20. 11.

<sup>43</sup> 1 Kings 17. 1 (‘these {ensuing} years’—an indefinite, undefined period).

<sup>44</sup> ‘He prayed earnestly (‘prayed fervently’; literally, ‘prayed with prayer’—*προσευχῇ προσήύξατο*—carrying intensive force) that it would not rain’, James 5. 17. ‘For examples of similar reduplication see Luke 22. 15 (*ἐπιθυμία ἐπεθύμησα*); John 3. 29 (*χαρᾶ χαίρει*); Acts 4. 17 (*ἀπειλῇ ἀπειλησώμεθα*); Acts 5. 28 (*παραγγελία παρηγγείλαμεν*); Acts 23. 14 (*ἀναθέματι ἀνεθεματίσαμεν*); 2 Pet. 3. 3 (*ἐμπαιγμονῇ ἐμπαίκεται*); Deut. 7. 26 LXX (*προσοχθίσματι προσοχθιῖς καὶ βδελύγματι βδελύξη*); Jos. 24. 10 LXX (*εὐλογίαις εὐλόγησεν*), Isa. 30. 19’, J. B. Mayor, *ibid.*, page 167.

<sup>45</sup> Deut. 11. 16.

<sup>46</sup> Deut. 11. 17. See also, ‘if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all His commandments and His statutes that I command you today, then ... the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron’, Deut. 28. 15, 23.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Kings 16. 31-33.

<sup>48</sup> James 5. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Exod. 32. 7-10.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Why does your wrath burn hot against *your people*’, Exod. 32. 11.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Why should the Egyptians say, “With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth?” Exod. 32. 12.

<sup>52</sup> 'When God made a promise to Abraham, since He had no one greater by whom to swear, He swore by Himself ... when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of His purpose, *He guaranteed it with an oath*, so that by two unchangeable things, in which *it is impossible for God to lie* ... ', Heb. 6. 13-18.

<sup>53</sup> Exod. 32. 13.

<sup>54</sup> 2 Sam. 7. 13, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Literally, 'have uncovered the ear of your servant'; 'a figure of speech said to be derived from the practice of removing the hair or a corner of the turban from another's ear in order to whisper a secret into it, cf. 1 Sam. 9. 15', A. F. Kirkpatrick, '*The Second Book of Samuel: The Cambridge Bible*', page 104.

<sup>56</sup> Possibly, (i) 'has summoned up the courage', see 2 Sam. 2. 27 ESV, NET, or (ii) 'has found joy in doing so', C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, '*Commentary on the Old Testament*', Volume 2, page 354.

<sup>57</sup> 2 Sam. 7. 25-29.

<sup>58</sup> Dan 9. 2-4, 16-17.

<sup>59</sup> Jer. 29. 10-14; cf. Jer. 25. 11-12.

<sup>60</sup> Dan 9. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Dan 9. 16-17. Through the intercessory prayers of Daniel, 'the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom ... "Whoever is among you of all His people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to *Jerusalem [the 'city']*, which is in Judah, and rebuild the *house of the Lord [the 'sanctuary']*", Ezra 1. 1-3.

<sup>62</sup> 'You will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me *with all your heart*', Jer. 29. 12-13.

<sup>63</sup> John 21. 18.

<sup>64</sup> John 21. 19.

<sup>65</sup> John 21. 23.

<sup>66</sup> While they prayed, Peter slept. 'Whereas Peter refuses to fear those who kill the body (Luke 12. 4), Herod later, by usurping divine prerogatives (Acts 12. 2-4, 22-23), fails to fear the one who can cast into Gehenna (Luke 12. 5)', C. S. Keener, '*Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*', Volume 2, page 1883.

<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, just as the people praying did not initially believe it when Peter was released (Acts 12. 15), neither initially did he (Acts 12. 9)!

<sup>68</sup> Acts 12. 7-10 with Acts 12. 12-16. The Lord had no problems with opening prison doors and/or gates: (i) He sent an angel to open the doors of the public prison in Jerusalem, Acts 5. 18-19; (ii) He caused the gate to open of its own accord, Acts 12. 10; (iii) He used an earthquake to open the doors of the prison in Philippi, Acts 16. 26.

<sup>69</sup> 'When God means to bestow blessings, He stirs up the hearts of the people to pray for them. *God, who decrees the end, decrees the means* ... So then, look upon the effusion of the spirit of supplication as a good sign; it is the first intimation and token for good of approaching mercy', Thomas Manton, '*An Exposition on the Epistle of James*', page 471.

<sup>70</sup> Ezek. 36. 33-37. This instruction stands in marked contrast to the previous occasions when the Lord had made it clear that He would not listen to their prayers, Ezek. 14. 3; 20. 3, 31.

<sup>71</sup> 1 John 5. 14-15.

<sup>72</sup> 'The "prayer offered in faith" is circular in shape; *it begins and ends in heaven*', J. Blanchard, '*Truth for Life*', page 334,

<sup>73</sup> Consider the prayer of Hezekiah, 2 Kings 20. 2-3, following God's message through Isaiah to tell him that he was terminally sick, 2 Kings 20. 1 (along with the reference to the 'boil', 2 Kings 20. 7). After Hezekiah prayed, the Lord sent Isaiah back to him with the message, 'I have heard your prayer ... I will heal you ... I will add fifteen years to your life', 2 Kings 20. 5-6.

When Hezekiah died, his place on the throne was taken by his son, Manasseh, 2 Kings 20. 21. Manasseh was then twelve years of age, 2 Kings 21. 1. That is, Manasseh was born around three years into Hezekiah's extended life.

Clearly, if Hezekiah had not prayed, there would have been no Manasseh—and the royal line of Judah would have ended with Hezekiah. As it is, we find that the royal ancestry of the Lord Jesus includes the all-important statement, 'Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh', Matt. 1. 9-10.

The prayer of Hezekiah proved critical, therefore, to the outworking of God's purpose in salvation, which rested entirely on the One who came through that very line, Matt. 1. 16, 21. Everything hinged on Hezekiah's prayer!

<sup>74</sup> We need have no reservations, therefore, about praying (i) for practical sanctification ('this is the will of God, your sanctification', 1 Thess. 4. 3) and/or (ii) for a thankful spirit ('give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you', 1 Thess. 5. 18).

The same is true, of course, about praying for (a) any virtues which believers of the church age are commanded to exhibit and/or (b) any actions which they are commanded to practise.

<sup>75</sup> Compare the assurance which the Lord had earlier given to Solomon, 'When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain ... if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land', 2 Chron. 7. 13-14.

<sup>76</sup> Compare the effect of the prayer of Samuel: "I will call upon the Lord, that he may give ... rain" ... So Samuel called upon the Lord, and the Lord gave ... rain that day', 1 Sam. 12. 17-18.

<sup>77</sup> 1 Kings 18. 39-45.

<sup>78</sup> 'James does not conclude his letter with greetings and benedictions typical of epistolary endings, but with a summons to action', G. J. Moo, *ibid.*, comment on James 5. 19-20.

<sup>79</sup> James 5. 19.

<sup>80</sup> Deut. 11. 16-17; 11. 28; 28. 14-15.

<sup>81</sup> Once in verse 19 and once in verse 20.

<sup>82</sup> The Greek word, 'ἐπιστρέφω'.

<sup>83</sup> The Greek word, 'στρέφω'.

<sup>84</sup> 1 Kings 18. 37.

<sup>85</sup> The Greek word, 'γινώσκω'—to 'recognize ... to understand completely', W. E. Vine, *ibid.*, article 'Know, known, knowledge, unknown', A. Verbs. 1.

<sup>86</sup> 'Someone'—'anyone' (Greek, 'τις'). Note that the duty is not confined to the local elders and contrast the words of Polycarp: 'the presbyters (overseers) also must be compassionate, merciful towards all men, turning back the sheep that are gone astray', Polycarp, 'To the Philippians', Paragraph 6. 1.

<sup>87</sup> 'Anyone among you', as James describes him—using the same expression as he had in verses 13 and 14.

<sup>88</sup> 1 Kings 18. 37.

<sup>89</sup> Literally, 'his soul', where 'soul' represents the whole person; cf. James 1. 21.

<sup>90</sup> T. E. Constable, 'Expository Notes on the Bible', comment on James 5. 20.

'The word "cover" is used often enough of "covering sin" that it becomes an alternate form for forgiveness. Thus, "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psa. 32. 1)', S. McKnight, *ibid.*, page 460.

No doubt, James (as Peter, 1 Pet. 4. 8) had his eye on Prov. 10. 12.

<sup>91</sup> James 5. 14-15, 17-18.

<sup>92</sup> ‘*The Confessions of St. Augustine*’, translated by E. B. Pusey, Book V, page 93. Prior to the quotation in my main text, Augustine wrote, ‘You, my refuge and my portion in the land of the living; that I might change my earthly dwelling for the salvation of my soul, at Carthage didst goad me, that I might thereby be torn from it; and at Rome didst proffer me allurements ... But why I went hence, and went thither, you knew, O God, yet showed it neither to me, nor to my mother, who grievously bewailed my journey’. The whole book can be accessed at ... <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3296/pg3296-images.html>.

<sup>93</sup> 2 Cor. 12. 7-10.

<sup>94</sup> Acts 23. 6; 26. 4-5; Phil. 3. 5.

<sup>95</sup> ‘God can transform troubles into triumphs ... *Paul prayed that God might change his circumstances*, but instead, God gave Paul the grace he needed to turn his weakness into strength’, W. Wiersbe, ‘*Be Mature*’, page 166.

<sup>96</sup> James 5. 14.

<sup>97</sup> James 5. 17-18.

<sup>98</sup> ‘The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears *the prayer of the righteous*’, Prov. 15. 29; cf. ‘*the prayer of the upright* is His delight’, Prov. 15. 8.

<sup>99</sup> Among the last words which King Arthur spoke to Sir Bedivere: ‘More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of ... What are men better than sheep or goats ... if, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer both for themselves and those who call them friend?’ Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), ‘*Morte D’Arthur*’, penultimate stanza. The poem can be accessed at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45370/morte-darthur>.

<sup>100</sup> ‘Prayer is a creature’s strength, his very breath and being ... Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscles of omnipotence’, Martin Farquhar Tupper (1810-1889), ‘*Proverbial philosophy: a book of thoughts and arguments*’, 1848 edition, page 62.