

The Prayer of Faith – Part 4

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – James urges believers to seek God in prayer to strengthen faith in every circumstance
2. aim – to cause us to earnestly seek the Lord in prayer as a means of strengthening our faith
3. passage – James 5:13-20

b. outline

1. The Prayer of Faith (James 5:13-15)
2. The Prayer of Confession (James 5:16-18)
3. The Prayer of Restoration (James 5:19-20)

c. opening

1. the **final elements** of the letter
 - a. we arrive at the last two (2) verses of a letter we began the first Sunday of December, 2019
 - b. **note:** I intend to preach next week a *conclusion* sermon summarizing the point(s) of the letter
2. the **final verses** of the epilogue of the letter
 - a. **note:** although ESV includes a paragraph break at the beginning of **v. 19**, I am not convinced that one is necessary – **IMO:** these verses are simply **the final words of the epilogue**
 1. a set of verses designed to give some *practical* advice on how to implement the main point
 2. **i.e.** regardless of circumstances, the man of faith will (sometimes) experience moments of doubt or inconsistency or sin and his faith will suffer – therefore:
 - a. he is to seek the *ordinary means of grace* for *spiritual* healing, confess his sin of faithlessness, *effectually* pray (as the righteous man) for the will of God to be done in him
 - b. and, **the prayer will be effective because it is God's will to answer such a request with greater faith, within his decree to make his own holy and blameless before him**
 - c. **e.g.** Elijah struggled with faith in a culture bent on *destroying* his faith; and God reassured
 3. therefore, **vv. 19-20** are *clearly within this*: someone “wanders”, someone “brings him back”
 - b. **IOW:** we could call this final part **the prayer of restoration** – the prayer of faith includes within it both a prayer of confession and a prayer of restoration

III. The Prayer of Restoration (James 5:19-20)

Content

a. the structure of the sentence

1. the verses are a single sentence in most modern English Bibles (with varying punctuation)
2. the sentence is (once again) written to believers in the churches *in a personal way*
 - a. **note:** the letter is *clearly* written to fellow believers (of all genders) – he used this word **19x** (**4x** in a generic sense; **i.e.** describing a believer; **15x** as an address; **i.e.** “my brothers”)
 - b. the word carries a very *personal* connotation (not as a bishop, but as a fellow believer)
 - c. **i.e.** these verses are designed to be a final bit of encouragement at the end of a letter strongly advocating for believers to be transformed by faith in Christ **no matter what**
3. the sentence is structured as a *conditional clause* (or an “if-then” statement)
 - a. **v. 19** is the condition – “if anyone among you” – **v. 20** is the result – “[then] let him know”
 1. **i.e.** “if” something like this happens in your church, “then” here is what you are to know ...
 2. **or better:** “when” something like this happens (**see above**), “then” know this ...
 - b. **IMO:** James is convinced that every individual will struggle (in greater or lesser measure) with weakness of faith – every Christian **and every church** will need to be prepared for this eventuality
4. the sentence is referencing two (2) different *potential* individuals
 - a. **potential:** not specific individuals *per se*, but a specific *situation* which involves potential *persons*
 1. **i.e.** “anyone” and “someone” are the same *indefinite* pronoun (*tis*) in the *singular*: **i.e.** a person; someone; “anyone” is used to denote the idea of a “random” (or potential) person (with “if”)
 - b. **person #1 – the wanderer:** “anyone among you [who] wanders from the truth” (**see v. 20 too!**)
 - c. **person #2 – the rescuer:** “someone [who] brings him back” (**see v. 20 too!**)
 1. **synonyms:** a *shepherd* who returns a wayward sheep to the flock (**1 Peter 2:25**); a *prophet* who turns a person back to God (**Matthew 13:15 cf. Isaiah 6:10**); an *evangelist* who turns a person (back) to Christ through the proclamation of the gospel (**Acts 11:21**)

The Prayer of Faith

5. the sentence has a difficult pronoun usage *and can produce some “funky” interpretations*
 - a. the pronoun “*him*” or “*his*” (*autou*) appears **4x** (and is implied in “a multitude of [*his*] sins”; **5x**)
 - b. but, the *object* of the pronoun is difficult in three (3) of the five (5) instances:
 1. the lone “*him*” in **v. 19** is obvious: it clearly refers to the *wanderer* (“*brings him back*”)
 2. the lone “*him*” in **v. 20** is *less* clear: who is to “*know*” what James is revealing
 - a. the next phrase clearly references the *rescuer* (“*whoever brings back a sinner*”)
 - b. so, the “message” is communicated *to the rescuer* – if you rescue, you are to know ...
 3. the first “*his*” in **v. 20** is obvious: it clearly refers to the *wanderer* (“*from his wandering*”)
 4. the second and *implied* “*his*” at the end of **v. 20** are the problem: who is the referent?
 - a. **note:** our tendency (in English) is to assign an *ambiguous* pronoun to the *dominate* noun (or pronoun) in the sentence, to assume the *subject* of the sentence is the object
 - b. **ITC:** “*let him know*” (referring to the *rescuer*) becomes the *dominate* pronoun, so we have a tendency to read the “*his*” here as *the rescuer* – **i.e.** rescuing someone who is wandering will save “the rescuer’s” soul and cover a multitude of “the rescuer’s” sins
 - c. **but**, would James agree that snatching another believer back from the brink of apostasy warrants an “automatic” pardon for the sins of the *rescuer*; that the “rescue” of a sinner means “automatic” salvation *for you*?
 - d. obviously not – given that the means of salvation is *by faith alone* – for James to imply that salvation is “automatically” granted to those save others would contradict the entire letter
 - e. **so**, the *other choice* makes much more sense ...
 1. the *wanderer* is called “*the sinner*” who is in need of rescuing – he is the one who needs to have “*his soul*” saved, because he is in danger of *apostasy* (**see below**)
 2. so, the message to the *rescuer* is: ***your attempt to keep a brother from wandering away from the truth is an attempt to save his soul and to cover his sin of unbelief***
 6. the sentence is written primarily *to the rescuer*, although relevant to the *wanderer*
 - a. **thesis:** **although the sentence appears to be a confirmation of what happens when a wanderer is rescued (i.e. comes back to faith), in reality, it is actually a statement of how important it is to be a rescuer, rescuing wandering fellow believers**
 1. **note:** the “*then*” clause – “*let him know*” = let *the rescuer* know ...
 2. **IOW:** if someone is *willing* to rescue a wanderer, then let him know ...
- b. the actions of the sentence**
1. **the wanderer** = the person who “*wanders from the truth*” – lit. the one ***in danger of apostasy***
 - a. *apostasy* = to abandon or renounce a particular set of beliefs – to wander away from the core truths of Christianity; to lose commitment to Christ in greater and greater measure over time
 1. some *apostasy* is direct and conscience (renouncing); most is simply a slow drift over time
 2. **i.e.** to doubt the veracity of the promises of God and lose the connection between faith and practice *over time*; to drift away from a trust in Christ by becoming enamored with the world
 - b. the old-time (synergistic) term was ***backsliding***: “remaining” a believer, but becoming so involved with sin that the individual is no longer “visibly” a Christian, but is still saved – why:
 1. the world is enticing – the desires of the flesh overcome any “eternal” desires present, and
 2. the church fails to disciple – the individual never grows beyond the simple “doctrines”
 - c. **here:** it would appear that James recognizes the real possibility of *true believers* wandering away (temporarily) from their commitments to Christ *because of the overwhelming pressure of the world*
 1. **IOW:** *not unconverted people*, but those needing to be “[brought] back”, “brothers” from “among you” that wander, those who need the elders for healing, who need to confess
 - d. the wanderer is the believer who, because of the pressure of the world, finds himself wandering from the truth because of doubt, confusion, anxiety, and the pull of the flesh – the person who trusts in Christ, *but the connection of his trust in Christ to his life of commitment to Christ is broken*
 1. the point of the epilogue: when our circumstances cause us to doubt the power of Christ over us, we need to confess that sin within the ***prayer of faith***
 2. thus, the point of the entire letter: don’t just be a person who *professes* to trust in Christ, but be a person who’s faith *transforms* every aspect of his or her life
 2. **the rescuer** = the person who “*brings back*” a wandering brother – lit. the one ***preventing apostasy***
 - a. **principle:** **the Christian faith was never intended by God to be primarily a “personal” matter (i.e. a personal relationship with God) – faith is both a personal commitment to Christ and a communal commitment to upholding one another in that faith**
 1. (**see above**) this sentence is written *primarily* to us as rescuers – it is the *flip-side* of the coin in the epilogue (above = the struggler; now = those who help the struggler)

2. Scripture *assumes* a strong, communal connection between the elect for discipleship
 - a. **e.g.** God interacting with a *nation* of people as his own; the *remnant* around Elijah
 - b. **e.g.** the *ecclesia* as a community worshiping, praying, fellowshiping, ministering *together*
 - c. **e.g.** the political “left” knows that breaking up churches (by preventing them from meeting) is the surest way of destroying the faith *inherent* in that community
- b. the rescuer is the believer who, because of his love for his fellow brother or sister, seeks to both *restore* such a wanderer and to *grow* the wanderer’s faith through discipleship and accountability
 1. **question:** when was the last time that you *directly confronted* a sinning brother or sister, out of a *true love* for him or her (contra the world’s idea of “love” = leaving them alone)?
 2. James insists (here) that mature believers need to take direct (preemptive) action to rescue their wandering brothers and sisters in Christ – their **preservation** depends upon it
 3. **the reward is seeing a fellow Christian persevere in faith – in knowing that you are (part of) the means God intended in his decree to preserve his own to their glorification**