



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 When Suffering
Continues
(*Aging*, pp. 26-35)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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When Suffering Continues

When we endure chronic illnesses we wonder, "Why do long-term afflictions come to God's people?" "How should we pray for healing?" Often we struggle with the book of James' teaching on health, healing, and faithful living in times of suffering.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: James 5:13-18

Responsive Reading†

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me, stand by me.
When the storms of life are raging, stand by me, stand by me.
**When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea,
Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me, stand by me.**
In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me, stand by me.
In the midst of faults and failures, stand by me, stand by me.
**When I've done the best I can, and my friends misunderstand,
Thou who knowest all about me, stand by me, stand by me.**
When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me, stand by me.
When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me, stand by me.
**When my life becomes a burden, and I'm nearing chilly
Jordan,
O thou Lily of the Valley, stand by me, stand by me.**

Reflection

Robert Rakestraw, who has endured heart disease for fifteen years, knows about chronic suffering: "It persists day after day and year after year, and this duration itself becomes a major part of the suffering." This is true for physical pain and for symptoms that involve other sorts of suffering, such as ringing in the ears, impairment of sight, loss of appetite, fatigue, breathing difficulties, mental disorders, emotional weaknesses, loss of memory and identity, or the effects of strokes and heart attacks.

God does not abandon us, but offers help for our physical needs. We see remarkable healings sometimes. Yet at other times we are not healed and we pray for others who are not healed. So, how should we understand the promise that "the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up" (5:15)?

- ▶ The *proper faith view* says health is restored if those who pray "have the right kind of faith." This creates much guilt for petitioners when they are not granted the healing they desire. "The prayer of faith," Rakestraw concludes, cannot be "so elusive and difficult to attain that even the most spiritual Christians today fail often to obtain it when seeking God's healing power. We need to be deeply grateful that God *does* answer our prayers for healing quite often, but we also need to recognize that, at times, the same people pray for healing in similar circumstances, yet see no healing."
- ▶ According to the *sovereign gift view*, "when God sovereignly chooses to heal, he gives the faith necessary for those praying." This fits with Paul's teaching that the spiritual gifts of faith and healing are given "to each one individually just as



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the Spirit chooses" (1 Corinthians 12:9, 11). Though this view rightly "honors God as the healer," Rakestraw notes, "it still leaves us with the question of why the invitation of James 5 is presented in such a wide-open manner, urging the seriously ill person to call the elders for healing and expressing such confidence that the healing will come."

- ▶ The *will of God* view suggests the promise of healing, like all other promises in the Bible, depends upon the will of God in each situation. "We are to ask for healing, knowing that God is able to do what we ask. However, we are to leave the outcome with our wise and gracious God, who may or may not choose to heal in this or that specific instance."

Rakestraw admits that he wavers between the *sovereign gift* and *will of God* views, though he favors the latter. Both views emphasize God's freedom in healing. On the *will of God* view, however, it is appropriate to add "if it is your will" to prayers for healing: we approach God with confidence, but without claiming to know precisely what God's will is in every situation.

Study Questions

1. Do you think the *proper faith*, the *sovereign gift*, or the *will of God* view is the best interpretation of the "prayer of faith" promise? What further questions do you have?
2. What do we learn from the larger context in James 5:13-18 about how God wants us to pray for the suffering? What is the role of the *community* of faithful disciples in this passage?
3. Does James 5 leave room for the application of our medical knowledge, or should faithful prayer replace those efforts?
4. Many Bible texts reveal that God is in favor of good physical health (see, for example, Exodus 23:25-26 and Psalm 103:2-5). What can we learn from Jesus' healing ministry described in Matthew 8:1-10:1 (and crystallized in 8:17)?
5. How does Paul illuminate the deep causes of suffering in the world in Romans 8:21-22?

Departing Hymn: "Abide With Me" (verses 1, 2, and 7)

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens: Lord with me abide!
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
change and decay in all around I see:
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Henry F. Lyte (1847)

Suggested Tunes: EVENTIDE or MORECAMBE

†From "When the Storms of Life are Raging," Charles Albert Tindley (1905).

When Suffering Continues

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	James 5:13-18	Matthew 8:14-17 and 9:27-10:1
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (review all)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3, 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To understand how we should apply the “prayer of faith” promise in James 5:15.
2. To reflect on our calling as a community of faithful disciples to pray for those who are sick and suffering.
3. To share our experiences and perplexities about prayers for healing from suffering.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the hymn “Abide With Me,” locate the tune EVENTIDE in your church’s hymnal. (An alternate tune is MORECAMBE.)

Begin with a Story

Summarize author Robert Rakestraw’s story, which begins “I was diagnosed with heart disease at the age of 41” (*Aging*, pp. 26-27).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with prayers by name for individuals whose suffering is chronic.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 5:13-18 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Many people experience chronic suffering caused by accidents, diseases, or physical and mental decline. This is particularly true as we grow older. Do group members have experience with chronic suffering? Do they agree that its *continuation* becomes a major part of the suffering? Invite group members to share briefly personal stories about their own or others’ chronic suffering, and the questions of faith that they struggle with. Rakestraw addresses the question, “How should we pray for healing?” This may be a painful topic for many members, especially those who have prayed and not received the healing they desire.

Briefly outline the three interpretations of the “prayer of faith” in James 5:15. Each view acknowledges that sometimes God answers our prayers with the restoration of health. Rakestraw seeks an interpretation of the “prayer of faith” that (1) preserves the sovereign freedom of God in the healing process, (2) is consistent with other biblical teachings, and (3) fits with our experience as Christians. The

proper faith view makes healing depend too much on the degree or purity of the petitioners' trust in God; consequently it places great guilt upon petitioners who do not experience healing. Rakestraw wavers between the latter two views, which leave the timing and type of healing up to God's will. He leans toward the *will of God* interpretation as more consistent with the interpretation of other biblical promises (for these, too, are conditional on God's will in the particular situations) and with Christians' experiences.

Members may want to explore other biblical passages concerning suffering and healing as time permits in the session, or in a second session. Matthew 8:14-17 and 9:27-10:1 are a recommended selection of stories about Jesus' healing ministry.

Study Questions

1. Rakestraw's reasons for preferring the *will of God* view are outlined in the study guide and lesson plan. He mentions other vexing questions: "Why do these long-term afflictions come to God's people? Is my illness my fault, at least in part?...How aggressively should we pursue healing through traditional medicine? What about alternative medicine? How do we live as faithful Christians when suffering continues and healing does not come? What is God saying to me through these trials, and how might I be a more effective servant of Jesus Christ because of them? Do I really want to be healed?" (*Aging*, pp. 27-28).
2. Members might mention that the elders, who lead and represent the church community, should be ready to pray for healing and to anoint "in the name of the Lord." They should pray with confidence in God's power and concern for our suffering. There should be mutual confession of sins in the community. Those praying should be "righteous," not because they are perfect, but because they are "in Christ," the righteous One. All of these features point toward God, rather than the goodness of the petitioners, as the source of healing.
3. Most commentators believe the anointing oil was not a medicine, but a symbol of the Spirit's power to heal (compare the instructions to the disciples in Mark 6:13). "Such a view," Rakestraw suggests, "does not rule out the use of medical science, nor does it focus on the oil as the primary requirement for healing" (*Aging*, pp. 28-29).
4. Matthew 8-9 gathers eight healing stories from Jesus' ministry: a leper comes to Jesus (8:2-4); a Roman centurion seeks healing for his servant at home (8:5-13); Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law's fever (8:14-17); Jesus drives demons from two demoniacs (8:28-9:1); people carry a paralyzed man to Jesus (9:2-8); while a synagogue leader pleads for healing of his daughter, a woman who touches Jesus' cloak is healed of bleeding (9:18-26); and Jesus heals two blind men (9:27-31) and cures a demoniac who is mute (9:32-35). Several mention the faith of the sick person or their caregivers, but others do not. Matthew 8:17 says that Jesus fulfills prophecy in Isaiah 53:4 of a suffering servant who "bore our diseases" on himself. Interspersed through chapters 8 and 9 are stories of Jesus calling disciples, and in 10:1 he commissions them to continue his healing ministry.
5. Rakestraw summarizes, "not everyone who loves God and seeks to live a life that is pleasing to God enjoys good health. The apostle Paul explains that this is because 'the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now,' and that we are in 'bondage to decay' (Romans 8:21-22). The entrance of sin into this world brought disease and decay to all of us" (*Aging*, p. 28).

Departing Hymn

"Abide With Me," which is a hymn for Communion, or the Lord's Supper, reminds us that Jesus' suffering was for us and that he is continually present with us through worship. It is based on Jesus' resurrection appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized [Jesus]; and he vanished from their sight" (Luke 24:29-31).

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.