

Pray Beyond the Sick List



By David Powlison

It sounds so simple. But it must not be that easy. Many pastoral prayers from the pulpits of many churches do not pray beyond the sick list—and they do not even pray very pointedly or intelligently for the sick. Many pastoral prayers sound uncannily like a nursing report at shift change in your local hospital: "The colon cancer in room 103 with uncertain prognosis... the lady in 110 with a gall bladder that's not yielding to treatment... the broken leg that's mending well... the heart patient going into surgery on Tuesday under Dr. Jones's skilled hands...." Such public prayers are often medically informative, but spiritually impoverished. Usually physical healing is the sole goal of prayer. At the most debased, a prayer might be nothing more than requests for doctors, procedures, and medicines to be effective.

Visitors to many of our churches might be pardoned if they get the impression that God is chiefly interested in perking up our health, and that the thing all of us most need is radiant good health. They might also be pardoned if they get the impression that God isn't very good at doing what we ask. The prayer list in many churches progressively fills up with chronic illnesses. And

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deep down we know that every person in every pew will die sooner or later, usually from progressively worsening ill health. Pastoral prayers, prayer meetings, and prayer lists too often have the net effect of actually disheartening and distracting the faith of God's people. Prayer becomes either a dreary litany of familiar words, or a magical superstition verging on hysteria. It either dulls our expectations of God, or hypes up fantasy expectations. Prayers for the sick can even become a breeding ground for cynicism: the people who get better—wouldn't they have gotten better anyway, as nature takes its course, or as medical interventions bring about their often predictable results? Or prayer can become a breeding ground for many bizarre ideas and practices: a spiritually sanctioned version of the exact same obsession with health and medicine that characterizes the wider culture; naming and claiming your healing; superstitious belief that the quantity or the fervency of prayer is decisive in getting God's ear; the notion that prayer has some intrinsic "power"; questioning the faith of a person who doesn't get better.

Changing Our Prayers

It's hard to learn how to pray. It's rare enough that we make an intelligent, honest request from capable friends whom we trust for something we very much need. That's all prayer is. But somehow when the making of a request

is termed “praying” and the capable party is termed “God,” things tend to get tangled. You’ve seen it, heard it, done it: the contorted syntax, formulaic phrasing, meaningless repetition, “just reallys,” vague non-requests, artificially pious tone of voice, air of confusion. If you talked to your friends or parents that way they’d think you’d lost your mind!

But if your understanding of prayer changes.... If your practice of prayer then changes.... If the prayer requests you make—and the ones you ask others to make—change.... If the model of prayer that you evidence with and before others changes.... If your teaching on prayer changes....

Consider a few factors that can bring about such change.

Keep Spiritual Issues in View

First, notice a few things about James 5:13-20. This passage is *the* warrant for praying for the sick. It is certainly significant that James explicitly envisions prayer not in a congregational setting, but in what we might think of as a counseling setting! The sick person asks for help, meets with a few elders, honestly confesses sins, repents, and draws near to God. Earnest prayer is described as affecting both the physical state and the spiritual state of that person. This doesn’t mean it’s wrong to pray from the pulpit for sick people. Of course not. But it at least ought to make us think twice that the classic text on praying for the sick imagines something highly personal and interpersonal taking place.

Notice also how pointedly James keeps spiritual issues in view. His letter is *about* growing in wisdom, and he doesn’t change that emphasis when it comes to helping the sick. What he writes is predicated on his understanding that suffering presents an occasion to become wise, a very good gift from above: “Count it all joy when you meet various trials.... If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask....” He has already illustrated this regarding the issues of poverty, injustice, and interpersonal conflict. Now he illustrates it regarding sickness.

James’ focus on the spiritual issues operating within any experience of suffering does not mean that people get sick because they’ve sinned. That’s sometimes so: e.g., IV drug use and sexual immorality do lead to AIDS

on occasion. People do reap in sickness what they sow in sin. But made into a universal rule, that idea is mere superstition, or the heartlessness of Job’s counselors.

At least two other dynamics also play out in the way God meets us in sickness. Sickness, like any other weakness and 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: neglectfulness, irritability, indifference, self-indulgence, unbelief, joylessness, worries, complaining, drivenness in work, trust in my own health and ability. I may find my need for Jesus’ mercies quickened, my delight in God deepened. I may develop fruit of the Spirit that can develop no other way than by suffering well: endurance of faith; hope and joy that transcend circumstances; mature character; richer knowledge of the love of God; living for my God not my self-absorbed pleasures; the humility of weakness; the ability to help other people who suffer.¹

And sickness, like any weakness or trouble, is itself a temptation. Whether you face life-threatening disease or just feel lousy for a couple days, it is amazing what that experience can bring out of your heart. Some people complain and grumble, getting grouchiest with the people who most care. Others get angry—at God, at themselves, at others, at the inconvenience. Others pretend nothing is wrong, denying reality. Others pretend they’re sicker than they are, seeking an excuse to avoid responsibilities of job, school, or family. Others invest vast hopes, time, and money in pursuing doctor after doctor, book after book, drug after drug, diet after diet, quack after quack. Others try to find someone or something to blame, even getting litigious. Others just keep pressing on with life, doing, doing, doing—when God really intends that they stop and learn the lessons of weakness. Others become deeply fearful—“Perhaps this is the big one”—imagining the worst, playing mental videotapes of their upcoming demise and funeral. Others milk weakness for all the extra attention and pity they can get. Others shirk responsibilities that they could fulfill even while feeling a bit subpar.

¹ See Jam. 1:3; Rom. 5:3-5; 1 Pet. 1:6-8, 4:1-3; 2 Cor. 12:9f.

Others plunge into a gluttony of utter self-indulgence: TV, games, food, reading. Others get depressed. Feeling lousy physically becomes an occasion to question the meaning and value of their entire existence. Others are too proud or embarrassed to ask for help. Others manipulate everyone within reach to serve their every need. Others brood that God must be out to get them, becoming morbidly introspective about every real or imaginary failing.

You get the picture! Sickness provides one of the richest opportunities imaginable for spiritual growth and pastoral counseling, as James 5 makes clear. Is God interested in healing any particular illness? Sometimes, sometimes not. But is He always interested in making us wise, holy, trusting, and loving, even in the context of our pain, disability, and dying? Yes, yes again, and amen.

People learn to pray beyond the sick list when they realize what God is really all about.

Long for Christ's Kingdom

Second, consider in a few broad strokes some of the vast biblical teaching on prayer. How many of Scripture's prayers focus on sickness? A significant few, giving good warrant to plead passionately with God for healing. We've already mentioned James 5. In Isaiah 38, Hezekiah pleads for restoration of health, and he is healed. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul prays earnestly three times to be delivered from a painful affliction—but this time God said No. Psalm 35:12-14 mentions heartfelt prayer for the restoration of the sick, and portrays this as a natural expression of loving concern. Both Elijah and Elisha passionately supplicate God on behalf of only sons whose sicknesses ended in death, devastating their mothers (1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4). In both cases God mercifully restored them. Coming at the issue from the opposite direction, the Bible's last word on Asa is negative because "his disease was severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but the physicians" (2 Chron. 16:12). He is chided for failing to pray through sickness. Prayer has many degrees of intensity, with supplication and outcry being the strongest. It is striking how passionate and blunt the prayers for healing are. These passages vividly challenge the perfunctory and medicine-centric prayers that often are said, even by people overly

preoccupied with praying for the sick! When you pray for the sick (and as you teach the sick to seek God for themselves), it ought to be a fiercely thoughtful firestorm.

It is clear, however, that the vast majority of prayers in the Bible focus on other things. As shorthand, let me broadly categorize three emphases of biblical prayer: circumstantial prayers, wisdom prayers, and kingdom prayers. Praying for the sick is one form of the first.

1. Sometimes we ask God to *change our circumstances*: heal the sick, give us daily bread, protect me from suffering and evildoers, make our political leaders just, convert my friends and family, make our work and ministries prosper, provide me with a spouse, quiet this dangerous storm, send us rain, give us a child.

2. Sometimes we ask God to *change us*: deepen my faith, teach us to love each other, forgive our sins, make me wise where I tend to be foolish, make us know You better, enable me to sanctify You in my heart, don't let me dishonor You, give us understanding of Scripture, teach me how to encourage others.

3. Sometimes we ask God to *change everything by revealing Himself* more fully on the stage of real life, magnifying the degree to which His glory and rule are obvious: Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, be exalted above the heavens, let Your glory be over all of the earth, let Your glory fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, come Lord Jesus.

In the Lord's prayer you see examples of all three. They are tightly interwoven when we pray rightly. The Lord's kingdom (#3) involves the destruction of our sins (#2) and our sufferings (#1). His reign causes a flourishing of love's perfect wisdom and a wealth of situational blessing. Prayers for God to change my circumstances and to change me are, in their inner logic, requests that He reveal His glory and mercy on the stage of this world.

When any of these three gets detached from the other two, prayer tends to go sour. If you just pray for better circumstances, then God becomes the errand boy (usually somewhat disappointing) who exists to give you your shopping list of desires and pleasures—no sanctifying purposes, no higher glory. Prayer pursues self-centered gimme, gimme, gimme. If you only pray for personal change, then it tends

to reveal an obsession with moral self-improvement, a self-absorbed spirituality detached from engagement with other people and the tasks of life that need doing. Where is the longing for Christ's kingdom to right *all* wrongs, not just to alleviate my sins so I don't feel bad about myself? Prayer pursues self-centered, morally-strenuous asceticism, with little evidence of real love, trust, or joy. If you only pray for the sweeping invasion of the kingdom, then prayers tend towards irrelevance and overgeneralization, failing to walk out how the actual kingdom rights real wrongs, wipes away real tears, and removes real sins. Such prayers pursue a God who never touches ground until the last day.

Practice the Three Strands of Prayer

We could give countless examples of these three strands of prayer operating wisely. Let me note a few. Consider the psalms, *the* book of talking with God. About 90 psalms are "minor key." Intercessions regarding sin and suffering

wisdom (in the light of the coming glory of God's kingdom). Such wisdom expresses itself in two dimensions, vertical and horizontal, love for God and love for neighbor. These two prayers plead with God on behalf of other people that both kinds of love would deepen: May God make you know Him better. May God make your love for people more intelligent.

Finally, consider Ephesians 1:15-23 and 3:14-21. Here, too, the intercessions focus on wisdom in the light of Christ's glory. Again, there are no circumstantial requests. In fact, there aren't even requests to grow in intelligent love for others. But Paul zeroes in on what we most need: I ask that God would make you know Him better.

Why don't people pray beyond the sick list? We tend to pray for circumstances to improve so that we might feel better and life might get better. These are often honest and good requests—unless they're the *only* requests. Unhinged from the purposes of sanctification

Unhinged from the purposes of sanctification and from groaning for the coming of the King, prayers for circumstances become self-centered.

predominate—always in light of God revealing His mercies, power, and kingdom. The battle with personal sin and guilt appears in about 1/3 of these intercessions. Often there are requests that God make us wiser: "Teach me"; "Make me understand"; "Revive me." God reveals Himself ("for your name's sake") by changing me. In many more psalms you see requests to change circumstances: deliver me from evildoers; be my refuge and fortress amid suffering; destroy Your enemies. These, too, are always tied to requests that God arrive with kingdom glory and power. God reveals Himself by making all these bad things and bad people go away! Then there are the sixty or so "major key" psalms. In these you see much emphasis on the joy and praises that mark the God's kingdom reign revealed.

Consider also the prayers of Philippians 1:9-11 and Colossians 1:9-14. Here we see no mention at all of circumstances. No request to be healed, fed, protected, or for other people to change. The requests entirely focus on gaining

and from groaning for the coming of the King, prayers for circumstances become self-centered.

Learn to pray with the three-stranded braid of our real need. Teach others to pray the same way. They will pray far beyond the sick list. And they will pray in a noticeably different way for the sick.

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Our last issue of *JBC* took on the broad topic of suffering, both how we experience hardships, and how we help others who bear troubles. This issue is narrower and more specific. We focus on the particular forms of suffering that involve *loss*. You will read articles that tackle the loss of our body's "healthy, normal" abilities, and articles that enter into the loss that comes with bereavement.

"When Grief Enters Your Door," what happens to you? What do you go through? What do you do next? Paul Tripp helps you first

to *think* your way through the experience of loss, and then to *walk* your way all the way through. Death brings darkness, separation, pain, and absence. The light of Emmanuel's constant presence enters exactly those experiences.

For the past forty years, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's theory of "five stages of grief" has dominated our culture's thinking about how people face death (and other losses). But her theory has many flaws and inadequacies. For example, honest sorrow at loss (grief itself) is not even one of the stages! And the supposed "stages" are not stages at all (an orderly progression), but simply describe a few of the variety of reactions that people have to loss, in no predictable order. Paul Randolph offers us something better and deeper than Kübler-Ross. "Grief: It's Not About a Process; It's About *The Person*" is field-tested, street-wise wisdom.

The two articles that follow come from authors who offer dual expertise, M.D.s who have also become biblical counselors. Michael Emlet's, "When It Won't Go Away: A Biblical Response to Chronic Pain," explores the intersection between our body's pain experience and the theological truths that interpret pain, mapping out a way forward through the ordeal. "When Your Body Betrays You," by James Halla, vividly captures the range of typical responses that people make when our bodies betray our expectations and our prior experience of good health. He then talks through how the sovereignty of the living God reshapes our expectations and response.

The next four articles are autobiographical. In other words, they bring

"testimony." They speak as "eyewitnesses" of the ways of God with man, telling stories about facing rheumatoid arthritis, Parkinson's, ovarian cancer, and infertility. William Osler, a renowned physician a century ago, once made this comment: "It is much more important to know what sort of patient has a disease than what sort of disease a patient has." You will find out what sort patient has each disease, and what sort of Savior has each patient. You will find that every story is similar, and yet each is different. Both that similarity and those differences say something very significant for counseling ministry.

Mary Yerkes tells how God met her and changed her through the widespread devastation that rheumatoid arthritis brought. Marjorie Bottorff traces her learning curve as the Teacher set up His workshop in the midst of her Parkinson's Disease. Jayne Clark lived through her cancer and deepened her worship, but her gains came at the price of other permanent losses. Kim and Phil Monroe faced infertility. They discuss the many honest questions that honest faith had to answer personally.

Finally, Neil Williams closes off this issue with a look at Ephesians 6:10-18, the Story of the Great War. Each one of us is in a firefight: live ammunition, casualties, ground gained, ground lost. But each individual's firefight is part of the bigger war. "Welcome to the Real World" aims to help us and those we counsel to get the story straight.