

God's promise in James 5 to heal needs to be understood, as the Jewish readers would, in light of the Old Testament. God had warned that disobedience would bring punishment including drought (Deuteronomy 11:16–17). Centuries later king Solomon was reminded of this warning by God and promised that the land would be healed if the people repented and turned to Him (2 Chronicles 7:12–14). Later during the reign of the very evil king, Ahab, God in judgment withheld both rain and dew as Elijah the prophet pronounced (1 Kings 17:1).

After 3 years of drought, the Lord promised to again send rain. Elijah confronted the false prophets of Baal and Asherah. They failed to get a response from the false gods. The people turned back to Jehovah. They killed the false prophets. When Elijah prayed, God sent the rain, “healing” the land.

This is the background for the illustration with James gives about Elijah in James 5:17-18. Elijah was not merely an example of someone who prayed. He prayed for rain to heal the land, when God had withheld the rain because of sin. A proper application of the illustration corrects three common misunderstandings concerning God's promise to heal.

I. *God's promise of healing was to those whom He has severely afflicted physically because of sin.*

1. *The sickness was physical and severe.* The two different words for “sick” (vv 14,15) have in the Gospels the meaning of physical sickness almost exclusively. The second of the two words means sick to the point of death. The illustration of Elijah also supports this in that God had sent severe physical calamity upon Israel.
2. *Sin was the reason for the sickness.* James presents explicitly the possibility of sin in verse 15 and stresses the importance of confessing sin and praying in verse 16. Again the illustration of Elijah supports this in that God had withheld rain from Israel because they had been sinning.
3. *God most likely imposed the sickness.* Never-the-less remember that not all sickness is the result of personal sin (cf. John 9:3), though sickness in general is because of the sin of Adam. Some sins naturally result in sickness. Sin can and should cause a sense of guilt which in turn can cause physical symptoms (cf. Psalm 32:1-4). God himself can also step in directly and cause illness such as in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:30).

II. *God's promise of healing was mediated through the prayer of godly elders.*

The solution for severe sickness caused by sin was repentance, confession, and to call for the elders who would pray.

1. *God's appointed instruments for healing were the elders of the church.* James is explicit that the sick person was to call the elders and does not tell them to go to someone with a gift of healing or call for such a person. In the New Testament no gift of healing was particularly associated with the elders, rather the opposite (cf Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5). On the other hand elders were to be godly men to whom God had entrusted oversight of the church (Titus 1:7; 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1). The illustration of Elijah points to this godly character.
2. *God's appointed means for healing was the elders' prayer of faith after the sick person confessed sin.* A recognition of and confession of sin appears foundational to the promise of healing (v 16). Furthermore, God says that the elders are to pray and He would answer their prayer of faith. (The anointing with oil in verse 14 was probably symbolic of the promise of healing and well-being. Cf. Psalm 23; 133:1–2; 141:5.)

III. *God's promise of physical healing was secondary to the goal of spiritual restoration.*

God is willing to cause illness to bring about spiritual restoration and sets spiritual restoration as a prerequisite for this healing. This priority is seen in verses 19–20. God will discipline His children when they wander from the truth (Hebrews 12:6,8).

1. *God's purpose in sickness for believers is never punishment.* If God wanted to punish, He wouldn't encourage steps for healing. Jesus took the believer's punishment for sin — all of it!
2. *God's desire is the restoration of believers who err.* Mature believers should seek to restore sinning believers (Galatians 6:1; Matthew 18:15–20). If you turn a believer back to the truth, you might be rescuing him from God's discipline and from sickness that could even lead to death (cf. v 20). Saving a sinner from death in this verse does mean spiritual salvation from spiritual death, put as in verse 15, “make well.” Correcting a brother eliminates God's need to discipline him. Cf. 1 John 1:9, God is ready to forgive when a sinner repents. The brother who restores a sinner will cover a multitude of sins. When a believer repents and confesses sin, those sins are covered over.

God's priorities are much different than popular promises for divine healing. Micah, the prophet, asked the question, “what does God require of you?” His answer is in Micah 6:8. “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (*Micah 6:8 NIV*) This is God's priority and not health or wealth. God wants righteousness in His children and may use sickness to turn you from sinning.

In such a case He also promises healing, when the sinner repents and confesses their sin. The repentant sinner can call for the elders. The elders are to pray in faith. And God will raise up the sick person.

But you need not wait until you are deathly sick to give thought to sin. Confess it. Turn from it. Pray for one another. If you are doing this consistently, you can be sure that sickness is not a result of sin.

Furthermore, be willing to humbly correct others and graciously receive correction. May God give to us a pure desire to act justly and to walk humbly before Him. May His priorities be ours. And may we encourage each other in this.