

AN EXEGESIS OF JAMES 5: 14-20.

BY E. J. FORRESTER, D. D.

The passage falls into four sections: (1) vv. 14 and 15; (2) v. 16; (3) vv. 16-18; (4) vv. 19 and 20.

These parts will be taken up in order; the language will be construed; and, as exactly as we may discover it, the thought of the sacred writer will be disclosed.

1. "Is any sick among you? 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 shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him." (vv.14 and 15.)

Here are three items to be examined: (1) The sickness supposed; (2) The remedy prescribed; (3) The result assured.

(1) The sickness supposed. The word rendered "sick" is from *σθένος* "strength," and a privative, and means "without strength." The word, therefore, describes a condition of weakness. The degree of weakness is not indicated; but weakness is, doubtless, emphasized by the choice of the word. It is a fact, also, that this word is used in connection with several notable cases of extreme illness recorded in the Scriptures, and so seems to have been the favorite word to set forth that sort of condition. Such cases were: that of the nobleman's son, who was sick at Capernaum, and who was "at the point of death;" that of the servant of the centurion of Capernaum, who was "sick," "and ready to die," if we follow the Receptus; that of the brother of Mary and Martha, of whom John wrote, "A certain man was sick, named Lazarus," and who, as we know, was sick unto death; and that of Tabitha, of whom the writer of the Acts recorded, that "she was sick, and died." Let it be further observed that, in the hypothetical case before us, the sick man was not to go to the elders, but was to send for them to come to him; and, still further, that when the sick man should be healed, he would be "rais-

ed up;" and, finally on this point, that in the expression, "the prayer of faith shall save the sick," the word rendered "sick" is different from the one so rendered in v. 14, and means "wearied out," and suggests a condition in which strength has been exhausted in the struggle with disease. It seems safe to say that all these considerations taken together permit us to hold that James was prescribing for cases of extreme illness.

(2) The remedy prescribed. Four points are to be distinguished: (a) The sick man was to send for the elders of the church; (b) The elders were to anoint the sick man with oil in the name of the Lord; (c) The elders were to pray over the sick man; (d) The sick man was to pray for himself.

(a) The sick man was to send for the elders. It is not that they are to come of their own accord, and to volunteer their kindly offices; but the sick man is to have despair enough with regard to all other remedies, and faith enough with regard to this, to take the initiative in the matter. Observe that it is the elders who are to be sent for—not any class of people who might be endowed with the charism of miraculous healing; for, so far as we are informed, that charism was not an endowment of the elders as such. It was to be the elders, not, therefore, as miraculously endowed, but as the leaders of the church, and so the representatives of the church in its ordinary spiritual power—as the church in miniature.

(b) The elders were to anoint the sick man with oil in the name of the Lord. Why anoint with oil? The oil was hardly to be applied with medicinal intent. It is true that such use of oil was freely made in the time of James. It was not, however, the only remedy and the remedy for all diseases. The fact that, so far as material things go, oil is the only prescription James here makes, where he is giving a remedy for all cases of extreme illness, is enough it would appear, to show that he is not prescribing oil as a medicine. So to prescribe it would be to say that he regarded oil as the only worthy medicine for extreme cases of sickness of all sorts. It is hardly fair to James to hold him to any such medical opinion. But, if not for medicine, then why the anointing? Two suggestions will be made, either one or both of which may be true. One

of them rests upon a practice of Jesus and the Twelve. Recall, for example, the case of the blind man whose eyes Jesus anointed with clay and whom he directed to wash in the pool of Siloam (Jno. 9:6); and compare the case of Naaman (2 Kings 5.) See, also, the statement that the Twelve "anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them." (Mark 6:13.) Now, why should oil, water, or clay be used in such cases of miraculous healing? Why, if not to show that they who wrought the cures were in league with One who could work, at will, with or without the use of means? The other suggestion is, that oil was intended to be a symbol of the Spirit by whose power the cure was to be effected, such symbolism being familiar to the Jewish mind of James. Both of these suggestions are believed to be reasonable; and they do not exclude each other. Both of them may be held, as illustrating what may be here set down as a true principle of Scripture hermeneutics, viz., that where the Holy Spirit employed an expression which will bear either or both of two interpretations equally well, and the context of which can not be made to decide between them, he probably intended that both should be understood.

(c) The elders were to pray over the sick man. They were not endowed with healing power, and could only look to God. Nor is it said that they were to instruct the sick man to ignore his symptoms, and all would be well. On the contrary, so far as this prescription goes, they were to pray, and leave the matter at that.

(d) The sick man was to pray. That is not expressly stated, but it is implied in the result promised. A part of that result was that, in case of disease growing out of personal sin, the sin would be forgiven, as well as the disease cured. The forgiveness of sin thus assured implies that the sufferer has participated in the prayer that was offered.

It is worthy of note in this connection, that in v. 15, where this prayer is described as "the prayer of faith," a different word is used for "prayer" from that used in v. 16, in the phrase "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man." In v. 16 it is *δέησις* the radical idea of which is "supplication;" while in v. 15 the word is *ἐπιχρησμός* the radical idea of which is "vow." It would

not do to press this difference to the point of saying that we ought to render: "the vow of faith shall save the sick." This word *ἐσχῆ* is used in only two other places in the New Testament. In both those places it is properly rendered "vow." (Acts 18:18 and 21:23.) It is true, as a general principle of interpretation, that if a word is invariably used in a certain sense, in Scripture, where the sense can be certainly determined, when a case is met with in which its meaning cannot be certainly determined from the context, we must fall back upon its invariable meaning in the other passages. The context in the case before us, however, sufficiently points away from the exclusive meaning of "vow," and to the meaning of "prayer" (which the word in cognate form certainly bears) to justify us in rendering it "prayer" in this passage. We should not, however, exclude the meaning of "vow," but should allow the word to bring us this richer meaning of "prayer" with the idea of "vow" included. That is to say, we may understand the Holy Spirit to intend, by the selection of this particular word, to teach that, along with supplication made for the recovery of the sick man, there should go a vow of consecration. This, it may be observed, in passing, is an additional reason for holding that the sick man himself was to engage in the prayer, seeing that he alone could properly make the vow for himself.

(3) The result assured. The sick man would be healed. There are two general aspects of this general result.

(a) The body would be healed. "The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up." The word rendered "save" is used for both physical and spiritual salvation. Here it means physical healing.

(b) The soul, also, would be healed, if the physical debility should chance to be the result of personal sin. "If he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him." The expression, "if he have committed sins," is, in the Greek form, a very subtle one, showing that, in the case supposed, the sick man is in a condition of guilt—a state of having committed sin, and strongly suggesting that his physical condition is the result of his spiritual state and history.

Does James, then, mean to say that this result of his

prescription is absolutely assured? There is nothing in the form of his expressions to indicate that he does not mean just that. There are two external considerations, however, which compel us to understand him as giving his prescription, not as an infallible remedy always entirely certain to bring physical healing, but as the best and only hope in cases of extreme sickness where everything else has been tried without avail. The two considerations that compel us to understand him in this qualified sense are: Our belief in his common sense; and our belief in his divine inspiration. He was a man of good sense, else he could not have been leading elder in the church at Jerusalem, and he could not have written this strong and practical letter. Being a man of sense, he knew that some people died in spite of all the praying that could be done for them. He was inspired, also, and has given us inspired teaching. The Holy Spirit would not inspire him to teach that any remedy could be applied with unailing success as to physical healing. The Holy Spirit would not so inspire him because it is not true. Not even the special charism of healing in those days was so bestowed that the persons thus endowed could always heal. Paul says (2 Tim. 4.20) that he left Trophimus "at Miletum sick." Why was not Trophimus healed by a man, who, on another occasion, was enabled to restore Eutychus to life? Paul himself had a "thorn in the flesh" (II Cor. 2:7-9) for the removal of which he very earnestly prayed. If his own prayers were by any chance not deemed sufficient, why did he not call in the elders and have them add their prayers to his? Why was his physical infirmity not removed? He answers the question. He says that the Lord said to him: "My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect in weakness." We are obliged, therefore, to understand James in a qualified sense with respect to physical healing. That, however, is not true with regard to the spiritual aspect of the result which he declares will follow the use of his prescription. Here we are to take him without qualification.

2. "Confess your faults one to another and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." (v. 16a.)

The Canterbury and American Standard Revisions

have very properly substituted "sins" for "faults." The word "faults," as it is commonly understood, is too restricted. The word used by James, *παραπτώματα* may have been once well enough represented by the English "faults;" but, in the evolution of language, that has ceased to be true. We think of faults as blemishes of character. That is our first and chief thought. The radical idea in *παρατώματα* is "failure," "falling short," just as the radical idea in *παραβάσις* is "transgression," "going beyond." In the New Testament, the most general term for "sin" is *ἁμαρτία* — in the singular to represent sin in the abstract, and in the plural to represent concrete cases of sin, whether of default or of transgression. When, therefore, James uses the particular word *παραπτώμα* instead of the plural of the general word *ἁμαρτία* we are to understand, perhaps, that he has uppermost in mind sins of a particular class; and when he uses that particular word, instead of the other particular word *παραβάσις* we are to understand that the class of sins uppermost in his mind are sins of falling short. Or we may be allowed to suppose that, for the moment, he regards the Christian's normal condition as one of complete harmony with the standard of right, and sin of any sort as a falling from that normal condition.

The confession of sin here enjoined being qualified as to the direction it is to take, would seem therein to be qualified also as to the scope of it. In other words, if we are to confess our sins to one another, the confession must be of such sins as may be characterized as social sins. If, therefore, I have sinned against any particular brother, which, of course, is at the same time and always, a sin against God also, I am to confess the sin to that brother; and he and I together are to pray God to grant me forgiveness. If I sin in such way as that my sin is an offense to my church, and a hindrance to its work, I am to confess to the church; and the church and I together are to pray God to grant me forgiveness.

3. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." (Then comes the example of Elijah.) (vv. 16b-18.)

Much power is ascribed to prayer of a certain sort.

What sort? There are three descriptive notes. (1) It is the prayer of a "righteous man." James does not mean a "perfect" man. He did not know any "perfect" men, in the modern sense of the expression. It is not hard to discover his idea of a "righteous" man. He was one who both believed and worked, who had faith and showed his faith by his words. (2) It is a prayer that is here brought into some sort of relation to a very peculiar word, the meaning of which we shall try to determine. The word is rendered by King James "effectual fervent." By the Canterbury and the American Standard Revisions it is construed as a participle, not with an adjective, but with a verbal signification; and hence they render: "The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working." "In its working" is the phrase that represents our participle *ἐνεργουμένη*. I do not believe that rendering is correct. The participle is in form either passive or middle. If we should take it as middle, we could only make out of it that the prayer is one that works in the subject or for the subject, the person who offers it; and so we should have the strange meaning that a righteous man's prayer works mightily in him or for him, and should translate: The supplication of a righteous man availeth much in its working in him or, for him. But we could not adopt any such rendering as either of those. If, on the other hand, we should take the participle as passive, it would signify "inwrought," and the meaning would be that the prayer of a righteous man when inwrought (by the Holy Spirit, of course,) availeth much; and we should translate: A righteous man's inwrought supplication availeth much.

The objection to this view is that we have no certain case of such use of *ἐνεργουμένη* in the New Testament. It is, in fact, however, a very rare form. In 2 Cor. 1:6 and Gal. 5:6, we find it, but in both those places there is the same impossibility that we here meet, of determining with entire certainty, just what is the sense. As the passage in Galatians is the briefer of the two, I take that as an illustrative example. We there find the expression: "In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love." So King James. But does *πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη*

certainly mean "faith which worketh by love?" If we should make a translation of this passage in Galatians parallel with that made by the Canterbury revisers, of our passage in James, we should render: "In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith in its working through love." Now, that, we immediately say, is not the meaning of Paul. He is placing spiritual religion in contrast and opposition to formal, ceremonial religion. It is not what the Galatians can do, in the way of external ceremonial performance, that is going to be of avail for their salvation, but it is an inward, spiritual grace, the grace of faith that is inwrought through divine love. So, then, we might make parallel renderings of the passages in Galatians and ours in James, thus:

"In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith inwrought by love."—Galatians 5:6.

"A righteous man's inwrought supplication availeth much."—James 5:16b.

In Galatians it is inwrought faith; in James it is inwrought prayer. In one place, it is inwrought faith that avails; in the other, it is inwrought prayer that avails.

This view of our writer's use of the word in question is supported, to some extent, by a similar use of cognate forms to signify internal operation by the Good and the Evil Spirit. (I Cor. 12:6, 10; Eph. 1:19; II Thess. 2:9). It finds some support also in the early Christian designation of the New Testament demoniacs as *ἐνεργούμενοι*.

(3) The third note descriptive of this prayer is the selection of the word for "prayer." It is *δέησις*. The ground idea is supplication. It was not necessary to speak of prayer in any other aspect as requiring to be inwrought to make it effective.

In illustration of the general statement he has made with respect to the power of prayer, James points to a locus classicus of the Old Testament—the great historical example of Elijah. He was a "righteous" man. In the execution of his God-given mission, he presented an inwrought, God-inspired supplication. His inwrought supplication availed much, even though he was a man of like nature with us.



4. "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." Three points are to be considered: the apostasy, the reclamation and the reward.

(1) The apostasy supposed. "If any of you do err from the truth." It is "the truth as it is in Jesus," "the word of truth," of 1:18. The "erring" is primarily intellectual, but extends, of course, to the affections and the will, and manifests itself in outward life.

(2) The reclamation supposed. If "one convert him." It is through the agency of one who has not apostatized that the reclamation is to be effected. There are always those who will lead others astray, and keep them astray, if only they can. (2 Pet. 2:18; 3:17.) Over against that dark fact is the glowing possibility of delivering the seduced from the power of their seducers and leading them back to the truth and to right living.

(3) The reward proposed. It is two-fold. (a) The sins of the erring life will be forgiven by the Lord. (b) The erring soul, brought back to the right way, will, through the divine forgiveness, be saved from death, that is, perdition.

Of course, the question of "falling from grace" comes up here, as it does in many places in Scripture and in actual life. The answer is presumed to be familiar to all preachers of the Calvinistic, Augustinian, Pauline type of theology.