

GEMS FROM THE ENDINGS OF THE EPISTLES
Part I: Gems From The Ending Of James, A. D. 45-48
(James 5:13-20)

I. Introduction

- A. The Epistle of James was the first of the New Testament books that was written, and it was authored around A. D. 45-48 (Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 434, 351; Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, p. 1397, “Introduction to the Gospel According to Mark: Date.”)
- B. The ending of this epistle at James 5:13-20 thus gives valuable insight on the beliefs and practices of the earliest days of the early church, and we view it for our insight, application and edification:

II. Gems From The Ending Of James, A. D. 45-48; James 5:13-20.

- A. The need expressed in James 5:13-15 was to be addressed by the afflicted one’s calling for the elders of the local church, James 5:14a. “Elders are first mentioned in Acts 11:30 as recognized leaders of the churches. Their mention here and in Acts 14:23 relates to about the same period in the early church, in which they were the first leaders, before deacons and long before bishops (overseers),” Ibid., fn. to James 5:14.
- B. Great misunderstanding has arisen in Church History over the meaning of the case in James 5:14-15: “Some seem to teach from this passage that full physical health is always just a prayer away. Others have found in this passage justification for ‘extreme unction’ or last rites, ‘(a practice begun in the eighth century). Still others have tried to relate the process outlined by James to the modern practice of invoking God (‘pray over him’) and using medicine (‘anoint him with oil’) – prayer plus a physician.” (Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 834) The misunderstanding clears up when we view the Greek terms that are used in the passage (as follows):
 - 1. The word “sick” in verse 14 KJV renders the Greek term *asthenei*, literally meaning “to be weak,” Ibid.
 - 2. Though this word is used in the Gospels for physical problems, it is often used in Acts and the Epistles “to refer to a weak faith or a weak conscience (cf. Acts 20:35; Rom. 6:19; 14:1; 1 Cor. 8:9-12).” (Ibid.)
 - 3. Also, the context at James 5:15 uses another Greek word *kamnonta* that the KJV translates “the sick” that literally means “to be weary,” Ibid. “The only other use in the New Testament (Heb. 12:3) of that word clearly emphasizes this same meaning” of being weary, Ibid.
 - 4. Thus, “James was not referring to the bedfast, the diseased, or the ill. Instead he wrote to those who had grown weary, who had become weak both morally and spiritually in the midst of suffering,” Ibid.
 - 5. Such a spiritually needy believer was to call for the church elders to come and pray over him, “anointing” (v. 15 KJV) him with oil, the word “anoint” translating *aleipsantes*, which means “rub with oil,” not *chrio*, to “ceremonially anoint.” (Ibid., citing Richard C. Trench, Synonyms of the N. T., 1950, p. 136-137)
 - 6. Thus, “James is not suggesting a ceremonial or ritual anointing as a means of divine healing; instead, he is referring to the common (Hebrew cultural) practice of using oil as a means of bestowing honor, refreshment, and grooming’ (Daniel R. Hayden, “Calling the Elders to Pray,” Bib. Sac. 138, July-Sept. 1981:264),” Ibid. Other Bible passages referring to this practice include Luke 7:36, 38 and Matthew 6:17.
 - 7. The restoration of the spiritually troubled believer, not one who is physically ill, is “further clarified by the assurance, **if he has sinned, he will be forgiven.**” (Ibid., p. 835)
 - 8. Believers are thus to confess their sins to each other and pray for one another that they might be “healed,” praying in faith in righteousness as did Elijah, James 5:16-18. “The healing (**that you may be healed**) is not bodily healing but healing of the soul (*iathete*; cf. Matt. 13:15; Heb. 12:13; 1 Peter 2:24),” Ibid.
 - 9. In summary, then, the case in James 5:13-15 did not deal with physical illness, but with spiritual problems, and the practice of anointing with oil so as to rub the troubled person with it is meant to restore one from discouragement and spiritual defeat coupled with intercessory prayer for his spiritual needs! There is no grounds in this passage for belief in Extreme Unction (“last rites”) or finding a recipe for physical healing!
- C. James 5:19-20 continues to focus on the case in James 5:13-15 and its added admonitions in James 5:16-18, clarifying that restoring spiritually defeated believers to fellowship with God saves them from an early physical death in the believer’s sin unto death! (1 John 5:16. (Ibid.; Ryrie, op. cit., fn. to James 5:19-20)

Lesson: *The Early Church did NOT teach the Roman Catholic sacrament of “Extreme Unction” or “Last Rites,” nor did it teach the anointing of physically ill believers for healing. Rather, in the culture of their era, it taught the need to lead spiritually weak believers with intercessory prayer to be restored to spiritual fellowship with the Lord.*

Application: *May we prayerfully intercede for spiritually weak believers and restore them to fellowship with God.*