

(3) JAMES: SELF-DETERMINATION CONVERTED TO PRAYER

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Perhaps our prayer life most accurately indicates the level of our spiritual development. It is no surprise, then, to find James including encouragements about prayer in his letter to Christians beset by self-centeredness (1:5-8, 16-18; 4:2-3, 13-15; 5:13-18). They needed to convert their complaining, self-determination, and self-interest into prayer, dependence on God, and concern for one another. In this connection we have selected for special consideration the effectiveness of prayer, the importance of divine guidance, and the prayer ministry of elders.

Effectiveness of prayer—James joins the authors of the gospels in affirming the effectiveness of prayer by encouraging his readers (1:5-8) to ask for wisdom and (5:13-18) to request healing and forgiveness, even as Elijah prayed for both drought and rain. Truth is, God gives his children the needs indicated in their prayers.

In many texts it goes without saying that the “yes” answer comes to petitions falling within the will of God (John 14:13-15; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24; 1 John 5:14). The writers are not speaking of a “name-it-claim-it” attitude when they deal with the opposite extreme all too prevalent among us: *“It doesn’t make any differences.”*

God is not a genie in a lamp we rub whenever want something. If that were the case, there would be less need for conversion from the self-centered mentality that James wants to eradicate from his readers. Answered prayer always means God’s choosing in terms of his purposes; it is not an automatic response to our desires.

God’s choice to say “yes” relates to his will regarded (a) *objectively* as to what it is and (b) *subjectively* as to the condition of us who ask. He answers in harmony with his purposes in both creation and redemption, and in light of the extent to which our human personalities conform to his divine ideal.

Relative to the latter concern, James mentions the conditions of (1) *righteousness*: “*A righteous person’s supplication avails much*” (5:16); (2) *earnestness*: “*[Elijah] prayed fervently for it not to rain*”; (5:17); (3) *confidence*: “*[Doubters] should not think they are going to receive anything from the Lord*” (1:17; cp. Matthew 17:19-21; 21:18-22; Mark 9:23; 11:24); and (4) *selflessness*: “*You don’t receive when you ask, because you ask with the wrong motive so you can spend it on your pleasures*” (4:3; cp. Matthew 6:5). Other writers add (5) proper relationship to other people (Matthew 5:23-24) and various virtues of the Christian calling. The privilege of bestowed blessings hinges on responsibility for Christian virtue.

In the full light of promised efficacy in prayer, we nevertheless know that not all our own prayers have been answered “yes,” even when they seem to fall within God’s revealed will. (1) *Personal Christian experience* does not bear out uniform results equivalent to wisdom, healing, or rain. Are we then to question our relationship to Christ or the satisfactory quality of our faith? Do we doubt the truth of scripture on this subject? Neither option seems so likely as re-evaluating the

intended meaning of particular texts in view of the general biblical context. The proper inference appears to be that legitimate requests offered by mature Christians may nevertheless be withheld.

In keeping with such an inference, (2) *biblical examples* of denial apparently confirm our personal experience. Jesus denied petitions from his disciples while still among them: why not afterward too? Paul's thorn in the flesh was not removed. James (the brother of John) was not delivered from Herod's sword (Acts 12:1) despite the likelihood that John prayed as much for him as he did for Peter, who was supernaturally released during the same wave of persecution. Jesus' own prayers for deliverance from crucifixion and for the unity of his disciples did not issue in his desire result.

Among the options for interpretation, we may consider the following. Is the statement, "*Whatever you ask in my name believing,*" (a) a promise about *kind* rather than frequency? In other words, are all *kinds* of benefits available through Jesus in contrast to just certain ones (John 11:22; 15:7), it being another matter whether they are always given? Is it (b) a contrast between *one thing* and something else? Does Jesus promise that we do not receive a scorpion for requesting an egg, a stone for a loaf, or a snake for a fish when we pray to the Father (Matthew 7:7-11; Luke 7:9-13)? Is (c) the contrast between *my name* and in some other way (John 14:13-14; 16:23-27)? All three points are interesting and in fact true, but they do not eliminate receiving everything we ask for. As a result, it is better to infer that (d) some passages make truly universal, or absolute, statements *within the assumed limitations* of God's general will for all people and his specific will for each of us.

In given experiences, then, we may look at the issue as governed by two contrasting principles: "*Whatever you ask in my name believing you will receive*" (Matthew 21:22, *etc.*) and "*My grace is sufficient for you*" (2 Corinthians 12:9). The first speaks of God's inclination to help us; the second refers to his self-restraint unto our helping ourselves. One has to do with privileges, the other with responsibilities. Thus, security in knowing that *God* "cares" and "can," combines with self-reliance in doing what *we* can.

Providence and guidance—Granting our petitions arises from special divine providence in which effects occur that would not have happened without prayer. Not granting them arises from general providence, which is carried forward by the laws of nature, also established for accomplishing God's will. Among those laws, God purposely included the limiting factors of death and attendant processes that force us to acknowledge our dependent state, hence, Paul's statement that his thorn in the flesh was for keeping him humble. Removing such infirmities lies within God's power to perform and constitutes legitimate requests; but we must remember that besides "yes" there are "no," "not now," and "if" answers as well.

Neither the sufficiency of common grace through natural process nor the possibility of special grace through supernatural dispensation are uniform modes of operation God uses in fulfilling his general will. God's principles operating in natural law do not contradict those made known through special revelation. Our parochial viewpoint and self-interest cloud our minds and cause us to focus on one to the exclusion of the other. God does not violate his other principles when he operates on the principle that whatever we ask in faith we will receive.

In the final analysis, there is no way to evaluate what supplications he will favor, nor is it evident what should be our expectancy on the proportion of “yes” answers. The proportion correlates with the quality of our lives and conformity to God’s revealed will for all Christians. There remains, however, the unknown factor of his specific will for our life at the moment.

We can accept the promise that God grants us all our requests minus the ones that are contrary to his revealed will, the ones that arise from selfish motives and inappropriate qualities, the ones discordant with God’s other principles of operation revealed and otherwise, and minus those that would remove growth potential. Answered prayer is not necessarily subject to the scientific principles of direct verification and falsification because a control situation cannot easily be established. We believe these truths about answered prayer, not because we can prove it experientially, but because we believe the promise he has made to us in his word.

James assumes that we must conduct ourselves in harmony with the principles and values of the Christian faith. When he addresses the question of specific guidance in our individual lives, he does not speak directly about seeking guidance by prayer perhaps because God does not tell us explicitly each move to make. James concentrates instead on the attitude of submission in everyday living. We are to say, *“The Lord willing, we will do this or that”* (4:13-15).

The approach he advocates contrasts not only with disregarding Christian values in decision-making, but with making appropriate decisions and then calling on God for help to fulfill them. Such a method still establishes us as the deciding factor and God as someone we use for furthering our own purposes. There may be nothing wrong with traveling to another city for a year on business, but the manner of deciding to do it can be wrong. Defective procedure is a concern because on occasion it yields defective results. In this case, it also detracts from the glory of God.

Healing ministry of the presbytery—One of the more controversial sections in the Book of James is 5:13-18, where he tells the sick to summon the presbytery for prayer and anointing. Two questions arise here: Is he dealing with answered prayer or express miracle? Does the instruction have to do with simple example or fixed precedent? We consider them briefly in the following order.

A. The procedure as answered prayer

For the sake of convenience in this study, we distinguish two kinds of things under the labels “express miracle” and “answered prayer.” Their characteristics contrast as follows:

<u>Express Miracle</u>	<u>Answered Prayer</u>
apologetic purpose (John 20:30-31)	for benefit purposes
uniform success (Deuteronomy 18:20-22)	other answers (no, later, if, otherwise)
visible intervention (no medicine, etc.)	invisible intervention
select Christians (Acts 8:14-24?)	all Christians
immediate results	results processed over time

Assuming the validity of these distinctions, we point out elements in the text that associate this procedure with answered prayer. (1) *The context establishes prayer as the primary subject.*

Although prayer sometimes accompanied our Lord's healings (John 11:41-44; Mark 9:29), it was not a uniform part in his practice. In James 5, however, prayer precedes, pervades, and succeeds the instruction to call the elders. The elders' work itself centers on prayer (5:14), and, strictly speaking, it is the "prayer of faith" that saves the person from the sickness (5:15).

(2) If this circumstance envisions miracles, we may wonder whether *a person could avert death* by constantly availing himself of miraculous recovery by way of the presbytery. The certainty of recovery here (5:15) does not exceed the certainty worded in association with answered prayer in 1:5 and 5:17-18. Inasmuch as the text does not have to be read as more certain than answered prayer, it cannot serve as evidence for a universal miraculous ministry by the presbytery in the first century or the present.

B. *The procedure as simple example*

We distinguish "fixed precedent" from "simple example" in that the former is done with the intention of being followed in the subsequent church age while the latter simply indicates an appropriate way ancient believers dealt with sickness. Fixed precedent looks on the procedure as a pattern to be carried out in much the same way as we understand baptism and the Lord's supper. It is the *elders who pray and anoint with olive oil in the name of the Lord*. If the formula is followed, the results are forthcoming; if not, the guarantee is void.

Among the marks of precedent vs. example is uniform practice in the apostolic era. Other patterns for healing found in New Testament literature incorporate other acts, especially the laying on of hands; some instances have non-elders involved; in other cases, part of this ritual is not included, namely, the anointing with oil. Mark 6:13, in fact, is the only other example that involves olive oil. Even within the paragraph under consideration another pattern appears, a righteous person being the only clear stipulation in 5:16 as to personnel and only prayer being specified as to procedure.

It appears from these considerations that the procedure described by James could be used but should not be required; it is example rather than precedent.

Conclusion—Christianity calls for conversion. Change from egocentric behavior to concern for others lies at the heart of true religion according to the Book of James. Doing more than assenting assures that people-for-themselves become people-for-others. So doing commits to the priority of God over self so that prayer does not just provide another avenue for self-determination, but a determination for the self by the One who hears our prayers and directs our lives.