

# **“The Prayer of Faith Will Save the Sick”: Revisiting a Complex Passage in Light of Intertextuality and New Testament Context—James 5:13–18<sup>1</sup>**

Brian R. Hand, Ph.D.

Bob Jones University Seminary

Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians rarely agree in their handling of Scripture. So when both affirm the intractability of a passage, it must be thorny, indeed. One such difficulty occurs in James 5:13–18. The Catholic theologian Patrick Toner observes:

“We know from experience (and the same has been known and noted in the Church from the beginning) that restoration of bodily health does not as a matter of fact normally result from the unction. . . . Are we to suppose, therefore, that St. James thus solemnly recommends universal recourse to a rite which, after all, will be efficacious for the purpose intended only by way of a comparatively rare exception?”<sup>2</sup>

Protestant writers concur. Daniel Hayden notes, “The evident promise inherent in the phrase ‘the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick’ (5:15) is an ever-lurking embarrassment for many who have known failure in trying to apply this passage to the physically ill.”<sup>3</sup> Keith Warrington says, “James clearly expects the prayer of faith to succeed. In the absence of such success, many contemporary suggestions have been offered.”<sup>4</sup> And R. Kent Hughes concludes, “*Prima facie* James’ directions did not ‘work’ for Ponnammal [a woman with cancer who grew worse and died after following the procedure outlined by James]. . . . Honesty demands that we admit that such is often the case when Christians attempt to follow this Scripture.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture texts in English are taken from the English Standard Version, © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Toner, “Extreme Unction” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909): 718.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel R. Hayden, “Calling the Elders to Pray,” *BibSac* 138, no. 551 (1981): 263.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Warrington, “James 5:14–18: Healing Then and Now,” *International Review of Mission* 93, nos. 370–71 (2004): 357. Warrington’s article provides strong arguments from biblical and extra-biblical lexical uses of the terms involved.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 254.

Having universally agreed on the complexity of this passage, theologians diverge in their interpretation of it. Roman Catholicism teaches The Anointing of the Sick—known prior to the 1970s as Extreme Unction.<sup>6</sup> This doctrine describes a process in which (1) those who are at the point of death can call for (2) a priest who has been appointed by a bishop (3) to pray for them as a representative of the only true church of Christ on earth and (4) to anoint them sacramentally in a fashion that (5) actually saves them spiritually from serious sins that would serve as serious impediments to eternal life and that hadn't been previously confessed to a priest. The following portion of the text that treats Elijah is largely irrelevant to the interpretation of the anointing of the sick.

Protestant theologians reject these points of Catholic interpretation, but they also differ from each other. Their interpretations form three major views: (1) that James 5:13–18 pertained to sickness only in the apostolic age and is inapplicable in the present; (2) that James addresses physical sickness in every age; or (3) that James addresses spiritual weakness. All of the Protestant interpretations have the advantage that they introduce fewer extra-textual concepts than does the Catholic interpretation, and the Protestant commentators handle the connection of James 5:13–16 with vv. 17–18 more effectively.<sup>7</sup> For instance, James does not limit ἀσθενεῖ (sickness, v. 14) to a sickness to the point of death; he does not refer to ἱερεῖς (priests) but πρεσβυτέρους (elders); he does not specify a limited class of leaders who had been appointed by a particular high-ranking church authority; he does not ask the elders to pray as representatives of the only true church; and he does not state or imply that the saving in view is eschatological.

---

<sup>6</sup> Roger L. Omanson notes that even the Catholic Church did not view the passage as preparatory for death until the ninth century. "The Certainty of Judgment and the Power of Prayer: James 5," *Review & Expositor* 83, no. 3 (1986): 433.

<sup>7</sup> John Christopher Thomas, for example, rejects the Roman Catholic doctrine and observes, "The purpose for the anointing he describes is to bring healing and preserve life, not to prepare for death." "The Devil, Disease, and Deliverance: James 5.14–16," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 2 (1993): 36.

Thus all of the Protestant interpretations handle the text more directly and accurately than the Roman Catholic view.

Of the three Protestant interpretations, one has greatest numerical support among the commentators—namely, the belief that James addresses the healing of physical sickness in every era.<sup>8</sup> Both supporters and critics of this position point out that the sick person often grows worse or even dies in spite of having practiced what James says will save the sick. This disappointment leads to the introduction of a caveat concerning healing, namely, that James 5:13–18 applies only if the Lord wills.

Such a caveat introduces two problems. First, a qualified approach to James's use of ἁσθενεῖ appears to contradict similar instances of ἁσθενέω/ἁσθένεια in the Gospel accounts. Jesus and his disciples could heal all manner of sickness (Matt. 10:1) and even raise people from the dead (Matt. 10:8). In only one instance was an attempted exorcism unsuccessful and that was due to unbelief on the part of the disciples (Matt. 17:14–21). Interpreting James 5:14 as physical healing thus introduces variance into the successfulness of healing in the NT—a variance that puts situational distance between the historical events of the Gospels and the ongoing events of James. Yet this variance undermines the argument that James is using ἁσθενέω in a manner conditioned by the Gospel accounts. At very least, James is not addressing an ongoing capacity to heal that matches the disciples' authority while Christ was on earth, and yet James writes during the earliest stage of apostolic labor—a time in which miraculous sign gifts were still operational.

Second, replacing “the prayer of faith” with “the prayer that believes that the Lord will do what He wills” does not obviate the difficulty that the passage locates effectiveness in “the

---

<sup>8</sup> See Hughes, 255–60; Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 252–57; and Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICNT, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 434–44.

prayer of faith.” The main verb still indicates success in healing. See Table 1 below for a visual depiction of this unsuccessful resolution to the problem.

*Table 1—The logical problem with substituting for “the prayer of faith”*

the prayer of faith	will save the sick
the belief that God will do what he wills	will save the sick

Essentially this solution introduces the statement “the belief that God will do whatever he wants to do will in fact save the sick.” This is logically incoherent, for it asserts that the sick are saved regardless of God’s actual will but only on the basis that the one praying *believes* that God will do what he wants to do.

The dissonance between the Gospels and James and the seemingly intractable problem concerning the phrase, “the prayer of faith will save,” does not rule out the traditional Protestant interpretation. It simply shows how hard it is for a single interpretation to explain all of the available data.

This paper will examine key concepts in both context and intertextuality that have a direct bearing on the interpretation of this passage. Due to the extensive interpretive issues involved, only a partial examination appears—namely, a discussion of those contextual indicators that point toward either a spiritual or general weakness in opposition to physical malady. The hope is that while such a partial treatment may be unsatisfying in its comprehensiveness, it might be stimulating in its depth on the issues selected.

### ***The Context***

One of the first complexities in the passage occurs in verse 14. James commands that the one who is ἀσθενεῖ (weak/sick) must call for the elders of the church to engage in a series of

activities relevant to his weakness. In the opinion of this author, several contextual features favor the perspective that ἄσθενεῖ addresses spiritual weakness or discouragement in regard to the faith.

### *The Meaning of ἄσθένεια/ἄσθενέω*

Conservative commentators generally agree that James was very likely the first written New Testament book.<sup>9</sup> It has strong connections with the Old Testament in both style and content,<sup>10</sup> and it clearly falls into the dual genres of wisdom literature and paraenetic epistolary writing.<sup>11</sup> These facts have direct bearing on the probability of James's usage of ἄσθενεῖ. James also personally witnessed some of the miracles of Jesus, and so any analysis of the vocabulary of James ought to consider the broader NT context as well.

James 5:14 uses the verb ἄσθενεῖ that is related to the cognate noun ἄσθένεια. The noun occurs 29x in the combined LXX and GNT (5x LXX; 24x GNT). Three key observations stand out. First, as Table 2 below illustrates, *none* of the OT uses of ἄσθένεια indicate sickness.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> See Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 712.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Clarence Thiessen claims that “there is no more Jewish book in the New Testament than the Epistle of James.” *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 271. Doremus Almy Hayes concurs, “The Ep. of Jas is the most Jewish writing in the NT. . . . If we eliminate two or three passages containing references to Christ, the whole epistle might find its place just as properly in the Canon of the OT as in that of the NT, as far as its substance of doctrine and contents is concerned.” “James, Epistle Of,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 3:1562. The Jewishness of James is so strong that Joseph B Mayor felt necessary to combat Spitta's claim that the book of James was a Jewish book from the first century B.C. that the Christians simply took over. *The Epistle of James* (London: Macmillan, 1913; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), cxci.

<sup>11</sup> Hayes, 1562; See Mayor's list of analogs to the OT in which the wisdom books (Job, Proverbs) are heavily represented in James (cxi–cxiii). While Moo does not point specifically to wisdom literature, he observes that James utilizes images and metaphors from the natural world, a phenomenon characteristic of wisdom literature. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 36.

Lenski observes the following connections with wisdom literature: “James is concrete and not abstract in thought. . . . His figures and his illustrations are taken from rural life, from sea and sun, from domestic life and from public life. . . . James certainly loves *paronomasia*; he has an ear for alliteration, homoeoteleuton, and rhythm. . . . Some of [his statements] have Hebraistic parallelism.” R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle of St. James*, Commentary on the New Testament (Augsburg; Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 512.

<sup>12</sup> The full data set appears in the Appendix as Table 2–A.

Table 2—Representative uses of the noun ἀσθένεια

Psalms 16:4 The <b>sorrows</b> of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.	spiritual/emotional weakness
Ecclesiastes 12:4 And the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding <b>is low</b> , and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low.	generic weakness
Jeremiah 6:21 Therefore thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will lay before this people <b>stumbling blocks</b> against which they shall stumble; fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish.”	generic weakness
Matthew 8:17 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our <b>illnesses</b> and bore our diseases.”	sickness indicative of spiritual weakness <sup>13</sup>
Luke 5:15 But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their <b>infirmities</b> .	sickness
John 5:5 One man was there who had been an <b>invalid</b> for thirty-eight years.	physical weakness
Romans 8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our <b>weakness</b> . For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.	generic or spiritual weakness
Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our <b>weaknesses</b> , but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.	spiritual weakness
Hebrews 5:2 He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with <b>weakness</b> .	spiritual weakness

Second, the NT book that most closely matches the hortatory tone of James—namely, Hebrews—consistently uses ἀσθένεια to refer to spiritual weakness. Only the Gospels, written *after* the book of James, use ἀσθένεια to refer consistently to sickness. Such data is inconclusive, however, because it is equivocal. Readers who prefer to see James in the context of Jesus’ healing ministry will naturally gravitate toward interpreting the weakness in James as physical sickness. Those who emphasize the genre and OT context of James will see ἀσθένεια referring to generic or spiritual weakness.

Third, while ἀσθενέω slightly edges out the individual occurrences of other words pertaining to sickness in the Gospels, it does so in a qualified fashion. See Table 3 below. For instance, Luke 4:40 uses ἀσθενέω with qualification by νόσος, *disease* (ὅσοι εἶχον ἀσθενοῦντας

<sup>13</sup> Leon Morris represents a significant number of commentators when he says, “Isaiah 53 is generally understood as setting forth in prophetic form some of the great truths of the atonement for sin brought about by the death of Jesus; it is unusual to see it applied to illness rather than to moral evil. . . . There is certainly the thought that the final answer to sickness is in the cross.” *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 198.

νόσοις ποικίλαις). In this location at least, Luke treats ἀσθενέω as a broad weakness that requires further limitation in order to be clear concerning its meaning.

*Table 3—Frequency of the most common words for “sickness” in the Gospel accounts*

ἀσθένεια	8x
ἀσθενέω	16x
βάσανος	3x
μαλακία	3x
μάστιξ	5x
νόσος	11x

The verb ἀσθενέω occurs much more frequently than its cognate noun (approximately 100x in the LXX and GNT combined), and it corroborates the noun-use data. The OT usage points strongly toward general weakness or spiritual weakness, *not* sickness; the Gospels use ἀσθενέω to refer to sickness; and the epistles concur with the OT usage by inclining toward either generic or spiritual weakness depending on the context.

The data in Table 4 below illustrates the breadth of OT and NT usage. Significantly, *no* passage in the OT uses ἀσθενέω to refer unequivocally to sickness. Daniel 8:27 seems to make an exception, but the context implies that while emotional/spiritual/physical exhaustion is in view, sickness is not. It is unlikely that Daniel experienced a viral or bacterial infection following these visions. A parallel incident occurs in Daniel 10:17–19, which clarifies that the weakness involved is a weakness of spirit and body, not sickness.

“How can my lord’s servant talk with my lord? For now no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me.” Again one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me. And he said, “O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage.” And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, “Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me.” (Dan 10:17-19)

*Table 4—Representative uses of the verb ἀσθενέω<sup>14</sup>*

Judges 16:7 Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become <b>weak</b> and be like any other man.”	physical weakness
--	-------------------

<sup>14</sup> The fuller data set appears in the Appendix under the designation Table 4–A.

2 Samuel 3:1 There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became <b>weaker and weaker</b> .	generic weakness
Job 4:4 Your words have upheld him who was <b>stumbling</b> , and you have made firm the feeble knees.	spiritual weakness
Psalms 18:36 You gave a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not <b>slip</b> .	spiritual weakness
Psalms 26:1 Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without <b>wavering</b> .	spiritual weakness
Psalms 31:10 For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength <b>fails</b> because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. (Psa 31:10 ESV)	spiritual weakness
Psalms 88:9 My eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.	spiritual weakness
Isaiah 7:4 And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart <b>be faint</b> because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah.	spiritual weakness
Jeremiah 6:21 Therefore thus says the LORD: "Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall <b>stumble</b> ; fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish."	generic weakness (lowness)
Ezekiel 17:6 and it sprouted and became a <b>low</b> spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs.	lowness
Daniel 8:27 And I, Daniel, was overcome and <b>lay sick</b> for some days. Then I rose and went about the king's business, but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it.	generic weakness (lowness)
Daniel 10:17 How can my lord's servant talk with my lord? For now <b>no strength</b> remains in me, and no breath is left in me.	generic weakness (lowness)
Zechariah 12:8 On that day the LORD will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the <b>feeblest</b> among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the LORD, going before them.	generic weakness
Matthew 10:8 Heal the <b>sick</b> , raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.	sickness
Mark 6:56 And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the <b>sick</b> in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.	sickness or weakness
Luke 4:40 Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were <b>sick</b> with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.	sickness
John 4:46 So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was <b>ill</b> .	sickness
Acts 9:37 In those days she became <b>ill</b> and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.	sickness
Acts 20:35 In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the <b>weak</b> and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."	fiscally weak
Romans 4:19 He did not <b>weaken</b> in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. (Rom 4:19 ESV)	spiritual weakness
Romans 14:1 As for the one who is <b>weak</b> in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.	spiritual weakness
1 Corinthians 8:11-12 And so by your knowledge this <b>weak</b> person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is <b>weak</b> , you sin against Christ.	spiritual weakness
Philippians 2:26 for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was <b>ill</b> .	sickness



Knowing (1) that James follows the genre patterns of OT wisdom literature, (2) that James was the earliest NT book, and (3) that James did not borrow from the *written* gospel accounts (it is impossible to determine how stylized the oral the gospel was at the point of James's writing) leaves the reasonable inference that James 5:14 may refer to spiritual weakness. This claim becomes stronger if James drew from wisdom literature for his vocabulary. The passages in Job and Psalms tend to use ἀσθενέω to reflect discouragement, depression, emotional weariness, or indecision. Table 5 summarizes the scriptural data by usage.

Table 5—Summary of ἀσθενέω

Old Testament	ἀσθενέω as generic or spiritual weakness	62/62x
New Testament	ἀσθενέω as sickness	16/33x
	ἀσθενέω as generic or spiritual weakness	14/33x
	ἀσθενέω equivocal	3/33x

Finally, commentators recognize that Clement of Rome drew heavily from James in framing his own *Epistle to the Corinthians*.<sup>15</sup> As Table 6 indicates, this epistle from an apostolic church father has important implications for the interpretation of James 5.

Table 6—The Evidence from Clement of Rome

<i>Corinthians XVII.1–3</i>	
<p><b>Μετανοήσωμεν</b> οὖν ἐξ ὅλης καρδίας, ἵνα μή τις ἡμῶν <b>παραπόληται</b>. εἰ γὰρ ἐντολὰς ἔχομεν ἵνα καὶ κατηχεῖν, πόσω μᾶλλον <b>ψυχὴν ἥδη γινώσκουσιν τὸν θεὸν οὐ δεῖ ἀπόλλυσθαι· συλλάβωμεν</b> οὖν ἑαυτοῖς καὶ <b>τοὺς ἀσθενοῦντας</b> ἀνάγειν περὶ τὸ ἀγαθόν, ὅπως <b>σωθῶμεν ἅπαντες καὶ ἐπιστρέψωμεν</b> ἀλλήλους καὶ <b>νοθετήσωμεν</b>. καὶ μὴ μόνον ἄρτι <b>δοκῶμεν πιστεύειν</b> καὶ προσέχειν ἐν τῷ <b>νουθετεῖσθαι</b> ἡμᾶς ὑπὸ τῶν <b>πρεσβυτέρων</b> . . .</p>	<p>Therefore, let us repent from our whole heart lest anyone of us might perish along the way. For if we have commands that we might do them, how much more isn't it necessary that we keep from perishing a soul which already knows God? Therefore, let us help each other and be leading back those who are weak concerning the good, in order that we all might be saved and let us turn back one another and exhort. And let us not only seem to be believing and to be taking heed now while we are being exhorted by the elders . . .</p>

<sup>15</sup> W. E. Oesterley, *The General Epistle of James*, in vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 386.



In every instance, with the possible exception of James 5:15, κάμνω refers to being bowed down in spirit. Since spiritual weakness is already a well-attested use of ἀσθενέω, κάμνω aligns well with this established meaning.<sup>17</sup> The burden of proof would seem to rest on those who would choose a meaning for κάμνω not attested elsewhere in Scripture. However, assuming that James knew the broader range of meaning for κάμνω that was current in the first century complicates the simplicity of this conclusion. As Liddell & Scott indicate, κάμνω could mean either “to be sick or suffering” or “to be distressed, meet with disaster.”<sup>18</sup> Again, the lexical data are equivocal.

### *The Meaning of ἀλείφω*

Oil had several basic functions in the ancient world. In the uses that could be relevant to James 5, oil could be used for (1) medicine, (2) ceremonial/sacramental anointing, and (3) cosmetic or social function. Commentators who accept either of the first two positions argue strenuously against the other position as contextually illogical. For example, Moo and Kent accept a sacramental anointing and so contend that a medicinal use does not fit James’s context well. They observe that (1) oil heals a relatively small number of ailments yet was commanded to be applied in all cases, and (2) a medicinal function would better be met by a doctor than an elder.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand Lenski argues that since James uses ἀλείφω instead of χρίω, he was

---

<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, outside the NT, κάμνω appears to maintain the same basic meaning as various texts demonstrate. See for example Chrysostom’s paraphrase of Paul, Κάμνω, οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ἰσχύει δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός (*Oratio de epiphania* 2062.452). Chrysostom seems to be referring to physical weakness, not sickness, and he is conflating ideas from Philippians 4:13, Galatians 2:20, and possibly elsewhere.

Another text extends κάμνω to old age: Ἀδελφὸς παρέβαλε γέροντι δοκιμωτάτῳ, καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· Κάμνω. Καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ γέρων· Κάθου εἰς τὸ κελλίον σου, καὶ ὁ θεὸς παρέχει σοι ἄνεσιν. *Aporphthegmata Eccl., Gnom. (collection anonyma) (e cod Coislin 126)*. Both of the above were accessed 9 May 2016 from <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/>.

<sup>18</sup> H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), *op cit*.

<sup>19</sup> Moo and Kent take the anointing as purely symbolic and explicitly rejects medicinal and other uses for this verse, See Moo, 177–81; Homer A. Kent Jr., *Faith that Works: Studies in the Epistle of James* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1986), 188–89.

not drawing attention to a sacramental anointing.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, it is inconsistent for a sacramental anointing to be in use at this (earliest) stage of church history. No record of such an anointing exists in Acts or Paul, though both give abundant testimony concerning the existence and proper protocols for the use of sign gifts.

The third perspective on the anointing believes that James is referring to a social grace that is designed to refresh and cheer one who is discouraged or otherwise weak. This position takes its evidence from both of the critiques of the previous two views, and it also argues from the prevailing NT use of ἀλείφω. Table 8 cites all of the occurrences of ἀλείφω in the NT. It shows that the bulk of the evidence lies in favor of social custom over against a sacramental or medicinal view. In six out of eight instances ἀλείφω refers to social custom that included cosmetic adornment and refreshment among its purposes. Only once is a medicinal or sacramental meaning certain.

*Table 8—ἀλείφω in the New Testament*

Matthew 6:17 σὺ δὲ νηστεύων <b>ἄλειψαί</b> σου τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι,	social, physical refreshing
Mark 6:13 καὶ δαιμόνια πολλὰ ἐξέβαλλον, καὶ <b>ἤλειπον</b> ἐλαίῳ πολλοὺς ἀρρώστους καὶ ἐθεράπευον.	medicinal or sacramental
Mark 16:1 Καὶ διαγενομένου τοῦ σαββάτου Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ καὶ Μαρία ἡ [τοῦ] Ἰακώβου καὶ Σαλώμῃ ἡγόρασαν ἀρώματα ἵνα ἐλθοῦσαι <b>ἀλείψωσιν</b> αὐτόν.	social, cosmetic embalming
Luke 7:38 καὶ στᾶσα ὀπίσω παρὰ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ κλαίουσα τοῖς δάκρυσιν ἤρξατο βρέχειν τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ ταῖς θριξίν τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς ἐξέμασσε καὶ κατεφίλει τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ καὶ <b>ἤλειπεν</b> τῷ μύρῳ.	social, physical refreshing
Luke 7:46 ἐλαίῳ τὴν κεφαλὴν μου οὐκ <b>ἤλειψας</b> · αὕτη δὲ μύρῳ ἤλειπεν τοὺς πόδας μου.	social, physical refreshing
John 11:2 ἦν δὲ Μαριάμ ἡ <b>ἀλείψασα</b> τὸν κύριον μύρῳ καὶ ἐκμάξασα τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς, ἥς ὁ ἀδελφὸς Λάζαρος ἡσθένει.	social, physical refreshing
John 12:3 Ἡ οὖν Μαριάμ λαβοῦσα λίτραν μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτίμου <b>ἤλειπεν</b> τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ ἐξέμαξεν ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ· ἡ δὲ οἰκία ἐπληρώθη ἐκ τῆς ὁσμῆς τοῦ μύρου.	social, physical refreshing
James 5:14 ἄσθενεῖ τις ἐν ὑμῖν, προσκαλεσάσθω τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας καὶ προσευξάσθωσαν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν ἀλείψαντες [αὐτόν] ἐλαίῳ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου.	in question

<sup>20</sup> Lenski, 660–61.

At this point, the evidence is beginning to accumulate. While each isolated argument instance might be equivocal, in each case the stronger the evidence lies on the side of a spiritual or general weakness being addressed by the body of Christ through a combination of prayer and social grace.

### *The Connection between James 5 and the Rest of the Book*

The theme of James seems to lie closely along the lines of *proofs of genuine faith*.<sup>21</sup>

Table 9 summarizes the application of this theme to the entirety of the book. While it is certainly possible that 5:13–18 treats the attitude of faith toward physical sickness, it seems to be more consistent with the spiritual nature of the book to see this crucial section as addressing crises of faith. In other words, it is this author’s studied opinion that James ends his book with the vital topic: *what should I do if my faith is struggling, if I am disheartened?*

*Table 9—James: A Study in Faith*

James 1:1–4	Faith considers the troubles that we face in life to be a cause for rejoicing.
James 1:5–8	Faith faces the pressures of uncertainty and ignorance by asking God for wisdom.
James 1:9–11	Faith maintains a biblical perspective on self-worth.
James 1:12–15	Faith endures temptation without falsely accusing God of trying to harm us.
James 1:16–18	Faith recognizes that God is the source of all good.
James 1:19–21	Faith rests in the justice of God and wisely suspends its own right to judge.
James 1:22–25	Faith intentionally applies what it claims to believe about Scripture to life.
James 1:26–27	Faith external religious forms reflect true internal worship.
James 2:1–9	Faith views others impartially, discerning correctly.
James 2:10–13	Faith seeks a consistent response to the law of God.
James 2:14–26	Faith works.
James 3:1	Faith accepts the justice of God.
James 3:2–11	Faith achieves a victory in speech that is not naturally attainable.
James 3:12–18	Faith aspires to and acquires true wisdom.
James 4:1–6	Faith recognizes and removes the source of conflict—selfishness.
James 4:6–10	Faith receives the grace of God by submitting humbly to the God of grace.
James 4:11–12	Faith lets God’s law, and not our own opinion, be the judge.
James 4:13–17	Faith rejects self-sufficiency and rests instead on the providence of God.
James 5:1–6	Faith acts justly because it recognizes true values.
James 5:7–11	Faith endures until Christ’s return.
James 5:12	Faith follows God, not culture, in speaking the truth.
James 5:13–18	Faith solves crises of faith biblically through the intervening prayer of spiritual leaders.
James 5:19–20	Faith restores sinning fellow believers.

<sup>21</sup> Kent’s commentary title, *Faith That Works*, indicates his concurrence.

James wants his readers to be aware that genuine faith is not immune to frustration, despondency, and even depression; however, he urges upon his readers the crucial thought that genuine faith looks to God (and his divinely-ordained solutions) even when facing crises of faith. In other words, God’s people may question him at times due to the severe trials and circumstances of life, but if they are truly God’s people, they cannot abide the vacillation of spirit that they sense in themselves, and they turn to Scripture for the solution. Those who merely appear to be Christian face the same crisis of “faith” and turn entirely away from God—renouncing him completely. Those who genuinely trust in God cry out in the agony of their pain, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)

Two crucial connections look back to James 5:7–12 and forward to James 5:19–20. First, one of the great stresses on faith is the lack of evident victory. If James’s immediate audience already felt the tension of an unrealized hope (5:7), those who follow nearly 2,000 years later experience this frustration even more. As people of faith consider the apparent inactivity of God in their world, their faith is challenged. James uses the illustrations of the OT prophets and of Job to counteract the all-too-human tendency to become disillusioned with the truth of the gospel. While Job suffered a physical ailment in the boils that Satan introduced, it is the crisis of faith and Job’s patience in the midst of that crisis that James seems to be addressing.

A brief recapitulation of the evidence of the terms common to James and Job illumines James 5:13–16. Table 10 depicts how the LXX text of Job uses ἀσθεν- and κάμνω.

*Table 10—James and Job*

Your words have upheld him who was <b>stumbling</b> , and you have made firm the feeble knees. But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you, and you are dismayed. (Job 4:4–5)
<i>They cut</i> the shaft of a valley from a dusty place, and they having forgotten the right way <b>languish</b> away from mortal man. (Job 28:4, translated from the LXX)
He seals up the hand of every man, that all men whom he made may know his own <b>weakness</b> . (Job 37:7)
I <b>loathe</b> my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. (Job 10:1)
I pray, <b>being discouraged</b> , and what should I do? (Job 17:2, translated from the LXX)

In Job 4 Eliphaz rebukes Job, saying, “When other people have been discouraged and ready to give up, you’ve given good counsel, but now that trouble comes to you, you are despondent.” Both the Greek and Hebrew underlying this translation point to a slackness, weakness, or bowed down condition attributable to emotional/spiritual discouragement. The *reason* for the discouragement is not the focus of Job 4:4–6. The dismay itself is the focus. As the various English translations suggest, the imagery in Job 28:4 is poetic and difficult to grasp, but the weakness in view in the verse is not sickness. It could refer to a general wearing away of life, a vacillation of mind or spirit, or other emotional/spiritual discouragement. Job 37:7 differs in the MT and LXX. The MT makes the referent *God* and has “His work” in the place of “his own weakness.” Both Job 10:1 and 17:2 (in the LXX) pertain to emotional and spiritual despondency. What this evidence seems to imply is this: when James points to Job’s patience, he is doing so in light of the crisis of faith that Job endured.

Second, the context that follows James 5:13–18 also points to a crisis of faith. While most biblical texts mark vv. 19–20 as a distinct paragraph, James is not starting a completely new idea. Rather, he seems to be summarizing, extending, and drawing a conclusion from the previous section. The following key points emerge: (1) the danger of swerving from the truth exists; (2) other believers need to participate in the spiritual life of the one who is so endangered; (3) successful spiritual interdiction in the life of one who is deviating from the faith results in a rescued soul. This may be the intervention described in James 5:14–16.

### *The τίς + Situation + Response Connection*

James 5:13 uses a formula common to the book. Table 11 illustrates the other instances of this formula. In each of the other instances, James provides a particular situation connected with the subject, *anyone*. In almost all instances, he also provides a response to this situation. In each

case of a described result (with the possible exception of 5:14), the result is a promise conditioned by nothing other than faith. This might suggest that effectiveness of the prayer of

*Table 11—The τίς Formula in James*

			Situation	Response	Result
5:13	anyone	among you	suffering hardship	let him pray	
5:13	anyone		cheerful	let him sing	
5:14	anyone	among you	weak	let him call the elders	will save, will be forgiven, will raise up
1:5	anyone	of you	lacks wisdom	let him ask God	it will be given him
3:3	anyone	among you	is wise	let him show works	
5:19	anyone	among you	wanders from the truth		
5:19–20	anyone		should turn him	let him know	will save soul from death will cover a multitude of sins

faith in 5:15 is likewise unconditioned beyond faith. But if so, James 5:15 is not true. The parallelism of expression in the *τίς-situation-response-result chain* leads the reader to expect a guaranteed outcome, but he finds exactly the opposite—namely, that a prayer of faith usually does *not* heal a sick person. And the interpreter who sees sickness as James’s primary referent must introduce qualifications and concepts foreign to the context in order to explain the failure of success.

### *The Connection between James 5 and Hebrews 12*

Important lexical and logical connections exist between Hebrews 12 and James 5. Table 12 highlights a few of these connections. Remember that κάμνω occurs only twice in the NT.

*Table 12—James/Hebrews connections*

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. <sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you sick? 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.	<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not <b>grow weary</b> or fainthearted. <sup>4</sup> In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup> And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. <sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."
---	--



<p><sup>15</sup> And the prayer of faith will save <b>the one who is sick</b>, and the Lord will raise him up. <b>And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.</b></p> <p><sup>16</sup> <b>Therefore, confess</b> your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you <b>may be healed</b>. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (Jam 5:13-16)</p>	<p><sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?</p> <p><sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.</p> <p><sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?</p> <p><sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.</p> <p><sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.</p> <p><sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,</p> <p><sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame <b>may</b> not be put out of joint but rather <b>be healed</b>. (Heb 12:1-13)</p>
--	--

Those two occurrences are in Hebrews 12 and James 5. Hebrews also picks up the concept of healing as redressing the condition of spiritual discouragement (12:13). Moreover, Hebrews 12 indicates that some of this spiritual weariness and despondency stems from unconfessed sin that eats away at a believer's faith (12:5–11). This concern parallels James's admonishment that confession may be necessary to healing. Is it merely coincidence that Hebrews uses exactly parallel terminology to James in describing a spiritual situation that matches *one of the three viable interpretations* of James?

Hebrews 12 follows Hebrews 11. That much is obvious. But Hebrews 11 stems from a long argument concerning the necessity of abiding in the faith (the confidence [3:3]; the hope [3:3]; the promise [4:1]) once professed. Hebrews 11 provides a series of illustrations from the lives of those who had every reason to renounce faith on the basis of their circumstances, but who refused to do so. Hebrews 12 strengthens this argument with the final example of Jesus Christ. Is spiritual discouragement likely in the face of trials (12:3)? Absolutely, but hold to the

faith nonetheless. The overall context and placement of Hebrews 12 in the middle of an extended homily on faith fits very well with James's overall context and placement of chapter 5.<sup>22</sup>

### *Intertextuality*

*Intertextuality* describes the way that literary works interrelate. More narrowly, intertextuality indicates that one literary work has alluded to another while expecting the reader to incorporate broader components of the cited work. The writer expects his readers to be sufficiently knowledgeable that they not only understand his allusion but also incorporate more of the plot or meaning of the previous work than he specifically references. If a modern writer dropped "*veni, vidi, vici*," into his story, he might mean nothing more than "I came, I saw, I conquered." On the other hand he might want his readers to draw parallels between the story that they are presently reading and the life of Julius Caesar. The second, deliberate use by the author would be an example of intertextuality.

Having given his already problematic and terse description of "weakness" and its cure, James drops Elijah into the text as an illustration of his point. Elijah, after all, performed a miracle with oil in 1 Kings 17:14–16, and he raised a dead child in 1 Kings 17:17–24 (not through the use of oil, however). They are the most natural possible points of connection, and they would enhance James's point in verse 16 ("The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working"). But James does not allude to either of these incidents. In addition, James could have used Elisha as his illustration. Elisha raised the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4:18–37, without oil) and healed Naaman (1 Kings 5:1–14, also without oil). So at least three classic

---

<sup>22</sup> It might not be incidental that commentators have recognized both Hebrews and James to be close to a homiletic or sermon structure. "The strong tone of pastoral exhortation" points to James's use of the rhetorical category of homily (Moo, 36). Carson and Moo conclude in reference to Hebrews, "The wealth of rhetorical devices in Hebrews has suggested to many (probably rightly) that this work was originally a homily." D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 596.

examples of intercessory prayer leading to healing from physical sickness were available to James, but he passed over all of these to draw from Elijah’s prayer for rain. Why? At least two possibilities exist.

### *Texts that Span the Healing*

James may have chosen this illustration because Elijah’s two prayers about rain bracket the incident in which he healed the widow’s son. Table 13 depicts this first form of intertextuality. As a form of *inclusio*, this solution is stylistically and logically pleasing, but introduces a problem into James’s argument. James draws attention to Elijah’s being “a man with a nature like ours.” In fact, this little detail heads up James’s use of Elijah as an example.

*Table 13—Elijah’s Prayer as an Inclusion with the Incident of Healing*

1 Kings 17:1	Elijah predicts absence of rain
1 Kings 17:2–24	Elijah’s miracles for the widow of Zarephath, including the healing of her son
1 Kings 18:1–40	Conflict with prophets at Mt. Carmel with the expectation that God would send rain
1 Kings 18:41–46	Prayer for rain and its arrival

But there is no evidence of this “like-passion” quality in Elijah in 1 Kings 17–18. In these two chapters, Elijah speaks very matter-of-factly, and the OT develops no psychological depth to him with the possible exception of his mocking the prophets of Baal. He shows no fear in declaring the famine to Ahab in the first place (17:1). He shows no doubt or anxiety when the brook Cherith dries up (17:7). He exhibits no worry or frustration when he left the territory of Israel to go to a Gentile nation (17:10). He displays no amazement or wonder at the miracle of food (17:14–16). He has no hesitation at the raising of the widow’s son (17:21). He exhibits no uncertainty in his returning to Ahab (18:2). He shows no fear in rebuking Ahab to his face (18:18). He indicates no unbelief or vacillation in confronting hundreds of false prophets (18:20–

40). So far, Elijah seems almost super-human. He’s a spiritual giant—impassive, utterly courageous, and unwavering.

In other words, overemphasizing the possible intertextuality of 1 Kings 17–18 with James 5 seems to miss the point that James is trying to make. The reader would come away with a far different conclusion (namely, that rare, specially-chosen, ultra-spiritual prophet types can pray, and God will hear) than the one to which James points (that frail, spiritually-exhausted, spiritually-discouraged people of faith can pray, and God will still hear).

### *Texts that Connect Causally*

A second solution exists. James definitely draws upon Elijah’s prayer for rain, but James provides the direction in which the intertextuality should move—forward into 1 Kings 19. By introducing Elijah through terms of weakness (James 5:17a) then citing Elijah’s prayer concerning rain (James 5:17b–18), James brackets the rain/flight from Jezebel incident, not the rain/healing of the widow’s son incident. Table 14 depicts this movement in the story.

*Table 14—Elijah’s Prayer and Flight as Intertextual with James 5*

1 Kings 17:1–24	Elijah predicts absence of rain & exercises faith
1 Kings 18:1–40	Elijah prays for rain & exercises faith
1 Kings 19:1–21	Elijah flees in fear and discouragement

This analysis of Elijah’s work is less literarily satisfying because it does not emphasize the *inclusio* outlined above, but it provides the greater logical and contextual explanatory power on the basis of James’s argument. In particular, in the middle of Elijah’s spiritual discouragement, he could not escape such weakness through simply “bucking up” on his own. He was spiritually despondent (1 Ki. 19:4), physically exhausted (1 Ki. 19:5), thinking irrationally and not exercising the evident, implicit faith he had previously exhibited (1 Ki.

19:10, 14), and feeling completely alone spiritually (1 Ki. 19:10, 14). Elijah's complaint (1 Ki. 19:10, 14) included: (1) the futility of faithfulness, (2) the powerlessness of the truth, (3) an expressed feeling of isolation, and (4) fear. This fits very well with James's description of Elijah as a man of like-passion (ὁμοιοπαθής).

God's response to Elijah prefigures James's instruction to the church. God provided the physical nourishment that Elijah needed (1 Ki. 19:5–7), a point paralleled by James's anointing with oil (5:14). God provided spiritual companionship (1 Ki. 19:5, 7, 9, 13), a point paralleled by James's bringing in of elders (5:14). God also addressed Elijah's wrong thinking through the combined exhibition of his power and command (1 Ki. 19:11–12, 15–18). Essentially, God strengthened and recommissioned Elijah, told him he was not alone, and provided for his physical needs. These issues parallel James's requirement for spiritually-mature people to intervene in the life of others and deal with their physical, social, and spiritual needs in the process of restoration. This second treatment of intertextuality connects 1 Kings and James much more directly and leaves fewer inferences to be supplied by the interpreter.

### *Summary*

Intertextuality does not absolutely settle the interpretive difficulties of James 5, but it does increase the weight of the argument that James 5 treats spiritual discouragement or a crisis of faith.

In particular, the fact that James chose *not* to refer to Elijah's healing ministry where such a reference would naturally and decisively undergird an argument for healing in the church calls this perspective into question. The fact that James draws attention to Elijah's weakness in relation to his faith and faithfulness points toward a spiritual-discouragement view. The fact that God addresses in Elijah some of the same concerns that James addresses in relation to "the

prayer of faith will save the weak” strengthens the spiritual-discouragement view. The evidence from intertextuality seems to lie more on the side of spiritual weakness than physical weakness.

### *Conclusion*

Having considered this problem intensively, I have personally come to the conclusion that James is not addressing physical sickness, but spiritual weakness. While physical trials can produce spiritual ones, James is concerned with the faith of his readers, not their health. He does not encourage the perspective that God will heal the physical illnesses of his people in an ongoing fashion throughout the church age. Prayers for the sick *do* sometimes result in healing, even in recent days, but these prayers do not capitalize on the teaching of James so much as on the genuine necessity of faith, which is incumbent on all believers, and on the unchanging graciousness of God. I recognize, however, that my interpretation of the text is not certain. The evidence throughout is equivocal. I believe, however, that the preponderance of the evidence lies on the side of the spiritual-discouragement view. Table 15 summarizes the preceding arguments and marks the view best supported by each piece of evidence. It does not seek to prejudice the reader by implying that there is *no* evidence to support the alternative position. It simply portrays the categories in which the preponderance of the evidence supports a position.

*Table 15—Summary and Tabulation of Evidence*

Evidence	Physical Weakness	Spiritual Weakness
The lack of need to qualify the prayer of faith with tacit conditions		•
The meaning of ἀσθεν- in wisdom literature		•
The meaning of ἀσθεν- in the Gospels	•	
Genre alignment of James with wisdom literature		•
Interpretation by Clement of Rome		•
Uniform meaning of κάμνω in OT and NT		•
Common and typical meaning of ἀλείφω		•
Context of James 5:13–18 in relation to James as a whole		•
Context of James 5:13–18 in relation to James 5:7–12		•
Context of James 5:13–18 in relation to James 5:19–20		•
The τις formula in James		•

Connection of James 5 and Hebrews 12	•
Intertextuality	•

The practical implications of expanding one's interpretation to include a spiritual-discouragement view are immense. First, if James is not addressing sickness, the church finally has an explanation for the apparent failure of his recommended procedure in practical attempts to heal the sick. This recognition would in no way prevent the church from continuing to pray for its sick or minimize the importance of such intercession. It would, however, explain how an unqualified scriptural command and promise have met such stubborn resistance by the facts of everyday experience. If the church has misinterpreted James, it has misunderstood both the command and promise that God has actually given.

Second, if spiritual weakness is in view, the church must be training its saints to seek help when facing spiritual crises of faith. Instead of continuing a maverick, individualistic silence, believers must interact on a deeply personal spiritual level. James does not depict spiritual discouragement as unusual. In fact, his use of Elijah as an illustration would prove that even spiritual giants and great men of God can become so disillusioned that they wish to quit ministry altogether. James provides the answer that is consistent with the message of his entire letter: People of faith meet crises of faith by seeking the spiritually undergirding intercessory prayer of other believers.

Third, if the spiritual weakness view is correct, it provides a clear process of restoration. Spiritual discouragement or vacillation may have roots in physical causes (hence the need for the social grace of anointing with oil) or in spiritual causes (hence the need for confession of sin). Neglect of either of these areas may leave the discouragement intact. In addition, James 5 reveals that the spiritually-discouraged individual may be so worn down that he is unable to pray

effectively for himself. He *needs* the intercessory prayer of others. This is entirely consistent with what we find elsewhere in the NT (e.g., Gal. 6:1).

Fourth, like all passages of Scripture James invites application of the principle to each era and culture in which believers find themselves. The discouraged or spiritually-wavering brother might not find much encouragement in having oil poured on his head, but he does need men of God to surround him, get him out of bed, shaved, cleaned up, dressed up, and out for a good meal, an excursion to the lake, or some other socially stimulating activity while nurturing him spiritually. God knows that the distress of the heart may stem from multiple causes.

Fifth, on the spiritual side of the equation, James's use of Elijah indicates that the discouraged or wavering individual may need direct confrontation of the false thinking (one of the sins he may need to confess) that has led to his spiritual enervation. God gently confronted Elijah's complaints: (1) faithfulness is not futile because God has plans for the future; (2) truth is not powerlessness because it is backed by omnipotence, (3) isolation is an emotional perception but not a reality, and (4) fear is unwarranted because the Almighty knows your situation and still reigns and provides for his own. In similar fashion, the spiritual leaders within the body of Christ need to confront the distorted thinking that leads to spiritual capitulation.

The combination of context and intertextuality could reorient the perspective of the church on the interpretation of James 5:13–18 and lead interpreters to conclude that James urges the following upon his readers:

Is anyone among you suffering, let him pray. Is anyone cheerful, let him sing.  
Is anyone spiritually weak, let him call the elders of the church and let them pray for him anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.  
And the prayer of faith will rescue the one who is despondent, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sin, it will be forgiven him.  
Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another in order that you may be spiritually healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful as it works.  
Elijah was a man with the same emotions as we have, and he prayed that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months; and he prayed again, and heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its fruit.



## Appendix

*Table 2–A—Significant uses of the noun ἀσθένεια*

Job 37:7 He seals up the hand of every man, that all men whom he made may know <b>it</b> .	generic weakness
Psalms 16:4 The <b>sorrows</b> of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.	generic weakness
Ecclesiastes 12:4 and the doors on the street are shut-- when the sound of the grinding <b>is low</b> , and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—	generic weakness
Jeremiah 6:21 Therefore thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will lay before this people <b>stumbling blocks</b> against which they shall stumble; fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish.”	generic weakness
Jeremiah 18:23 Yet you, O LORD, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be <b>overthrown</b> before you; deal with them in the time of your anger.	generic weakness
Matthew 8:17 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “He took our <b>illnesses</b> and bore our diseases.”	sickness indicative of spiritual weakness
Luke 5:15 But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their <b>infirmities</b> .	sickness
Luke 8:2 and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and <b>infirmities</b> : Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,	sickness
Luke 13:11 And behold, there was a woman who had had a <b>disabling</b> spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.	physical weakness
Luke 13:12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your <b>disability</b> .”	physical weakness
John 5:5 One man was there who had been an <b>invalid</b> for thirty-eight years.	physical weakness
John 11:4 But when Jesus heard it he said, “This <b>illness</b> does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”	sickness
Acts 28:9 And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had <b>diseases</b> also came and were cured.	sickness
Romans 6:19 I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural <b>limitations</b> . For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.	generic weakness
Romans 8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our <b>weakness</b> . For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.	generic weakness
1 Corinthians 2:3 And I was with you in <b>weakness</b> and in fear and much trembling,	generic weakness
1 Corinthians 15:43 It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in <b>weakness</b> ; it is raised in power.	generic weakness
2 Corinthians 11:30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my <b>weakness</b> .	generic weakness
2 Corinthians 12:5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses--	generic weakness
2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in <b>weakness</b> .” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my <b>weaknesses</b> , so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.	generic weakness

2 Corinthians 12:10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with <b>weaknesses</b> , insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.	generic weakness
2 Corinthians 13:4 For he was crucified in <b>weakness</b> , but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.	generic weakness
Galatians 4:13 You know it was because of a bodily <b>ailment</b> that I preached the gospel to you at first,	sickness
1 Timothy 5:23 (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent <b>ailments</b> .)	sickness
Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our <b>weaknesses</b> , but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.	spiritual weakness
Hebrews 5:2 He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with <b>weakness</b> .	spiritual weakness
Hebrews 7:28 For the law appoints men in their <b>weakness</b> as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.	spiritual weakness
Hebrews 11:34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of <b>weakness</b> , became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.	generic weakness

*Table 4-A—Uses of the verb ἀσθενέω*

Judges 6:15 And he said to him, “Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the <b>weakest</b> in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.”	generic weakness
Judges 16:7 Samson said to her, “If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become <b>weak</b> and be like any other man.”	physical weakness
1 Samuel 2:4 The bows of the mighty are broken, but the <b>feeble</b> bind on strength.	generic weakness
2 Samuel 3:1 There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. And David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became <b>weaker and weaker</b> .	generic weakness
Job 4:4 Your words have upheld him who was <b>stumbling</b> , and you have made firm the feeble knees.	spiritual weakness
Job 28:4 He opens shafts in a valley away from where anyone lives; they are forgotten by travelers; they hang in the air, far away from mankind; they <b>swing to and fro</b> .	vacillation
Psalms 9:3 When my enemies turn back, they <b>stumble</b> and perish before your presence.	spiritual weakness
Psalms 18:36 You gave a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not <b>slip</b> .	spiritual weakness
Psalms 26:1 Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without <b>wavering</b> .	spiritual weakness
Psalms 27:2 When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who <b>stumble</b> and fall.	spiritual weakness
Psalms 31:10 For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength <b>fails</b> because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. (Psa 31:10 ESV)	spiritual weakness
Psalms 58:7 Let them vanish like water that runs away; when he aims his arrows, let them be <b>blunted</b> .	generic weakness
Psalms 68:9 Rain in abundance, O God, you shed abroad; you restored your inheritance as it <b>languished</b> ;	generic weakness
Psalms 88:9 my eye <b>grows dim</b> through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.	spiritual weakness
Psalms 105:37 Then he brought out Israel with silver and gold, and there was none among his tribes who <b>stumbled</b> .	generic weakness

Psalm 107:12 So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor; <b>they fell down</b> , with none to help.	physical weakness
Psalm 109:24 My knees are <b>weak</b> through fasting; my body has become gaunt, with no fat.	physical weakness
Proverbs 24:16 for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked <b>stumble</b> in times of calamity.	spiritual weakness
Isaiah 7:4 And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart <b>be faint</b> because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah.	spiritual weakness
Isaiah 44:12 The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength <b>fails</b> ; he drinks no water and is faint.	generic weakness
Jeremiah 6:21 Therefore thus says the LORD: "Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall <b>stumble</b> ; fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish."	generic weakness (lowness)
Jeremiah 18:15 But my people have forgotten me; they make offerings to false gods; they made them <b>stumble</b> in their ways, in the ancient roads, and to walk into side roads, not the highway.	generic weakness (lowness)
Jeremiah 46:6 The swift cannot flee away, nor the warrior escape; in the north by the river Euphrates they have <b>stumbled</b> and fallen. (cf. also vv. 12, 16)	generic weakness (lowness)
Lamentations 1:14 My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength <b>to fail</b> ; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand.	spiritual weakness
Ezekiel 17:6 and it sprouted and became a <b>low</b> spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs.	lowness
Daniel 8:27 And I, Daniel, was overcome and <b>lay sick</b> for some days. Then I rose and went about the king's business, but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it.	generic weakness (lowness)
Daniel 10:17 How can my lord's servant talk with my lord? For now <b>no strength</b> remains in me, and no breath is left in me.	generic weakness (lowness)
Daniel 11:19 Then he shall turn his face back toward the fortresses of his own land, but he shall <b>stumble</b> and fall, and shall not be found. cf. vv. 33, 34, 35, 41)	generic weakness (lowness)
Hosea 4:5 You shall <b>stumble</b> by day; the prophet also shall <b>stumble</b> with you by night; and I will destroy your mother.	spiritual weakness
Hosea 5:5 The pride of Israel testifies to his face; Israel and Ephraim shall <b>stumble</b> in his guilt; Judah also shall <b>stumble</b> with them.	spiritual weakness
Nahum 2:5 He remembers his officers; they <b>stumble</b> as they go, they hasten to the wall; the siege tower is set up.	generic weakness
Zechariah 12:8 On that day the LORD will protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the <b>feeblest</b> among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the angel of the LORD, going before them.	generic weakness
Matthew 10:8 Heal the <b>sick</b> , raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.	sickness
Matthew 25:36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was <b>sick</b> and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.	equivocal: sick, weak, despondent
Mark 6:56 And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the <b>sick</b> in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.	sickness or weakness

Luke 4:40 Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were <b>sick</b> with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.	sickness
John 4:46 So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was <b>ill</b> .	sickness
John 5:7 The <b>sick</b> man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.”	weakness
John 11:1 Now a certain man <b>was ill</b> , Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (cf. vv. 2, 3, 6)	sickness
Acts 9:37 In those days she became <b>ill</b> and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.	sickness
Acts 19:12 so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the <b>sick</b> , and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.	sickness
Acts 20:35 In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the <b>weak</b> and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”	fiscally weak
Romans 4:19 He did not <b>weaken</b> in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. (Rom 4:19 ESV)	spiritual weakness
Romans 14:1 As for the one who is <b>weak</b> in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.	spiritual weakness
1 Corinthians 8:11–12 And so by your knowledge this <b>weak</b> person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is <b>weak</b> , you sin against Christ.	spiritual weakness
2 Corinthians 11:29 Who is <b>weak</b> , and I am not <b>weak</b> ? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?	spiritual weakness
2 Corinthians 12:10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with <b>weaknesses</b> , insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am <b>weak</b> , then I am strong.	generic weakness
Philippians 2:26 for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was <b>ill</b> .	sickness

### *A Defense of the Spiritual Weakness View from the Literature*

The perspective that the “sick” person in James 5 is not experiencing a physical malady but a spiritual/emotional one is not novel. Hayden presents a reasonable argument for this position, though he probably goes too far in ruling out physical weakness altogether.<sup>23</sup> He concludes, “The emphasis of James is clearly on the emotional distress and spiritual exhaustion experience by God’s people in their deep struggle with temptation and their relentless battle with besetting sin.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Hayden says of himself, “This writer suggests that James 5:13–18 is not referring to physical sickness at all, but is rather giving instruction for dealing with persons who are discouraged or depressed” (258).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 263.

Warrington argues extensively that interpreters cannot limit ἀσθένεια to physical sickness. In fact, he demonstrates that the LXX fails to use *astheneō* precisely where the underlying Hebrew text indicates physical sickness.<sup>25</sup> His similar investigation of the terms *kamnō*, *sōzō*, *egeirō*, *iaomai*, and *aleiphō* indicates a similarly broad concept of restoration from any form of weakness rather than a limited medicinal or sacramental healing of physical sickness.<sup>26</sup> The result of Warrington's research is not so much the establishment of a clear-cut alternative to the traditional view as a questioning of the validity of the narrow interpretation offered by the traditional view. His position undergirds the spiritual weakness view without overturning the physical sickness view.

At least one notable commentator who defends the interpretation of ἀσθένεια as sickness admits that the corresponding term, κάμνω, creates a difficulty for his perspective. D. Edmond Hiebert notes that κάμνω “occurs only here in the New Testament with reference to physical illness. The verb primarily means ‘to be weary, fatigued.’”<sup>27</sup> An admission such as this, against interest, provides strong argument against too hasty a resolution to the problem. For his part, Hiebert defends his position thoughtfully so that he does not resort to special pleading in regard to the meaning of κάμνω in this location.

John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck conclude that James addresses those who are worn down spiritually. Their argument observes that ἀσθένεια has a broad (and, therefore equivocal) meaning and κάμνω has a clear meaning that points away from physical sickness.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> “When Greek words are used to translate Hebrew words relating to ‘sickness’ or ‘disease’, although a wide variety of Greek words is used, *astheneō* and its cognates are never used. Given that the author of James and the readers are Jewish, this is at least worthy of consideration” (348).

<sup>26</sup> Warrington examines these terms through the LXX, Jewish writings, NT, and early church fathers.

<sup>27</sup> *The Epistle of James: Tests of a Living Faith*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 323.

<sup>28</sup> John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament edition (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 834.

The majority of commentators reject the position articulated by these writers and insist that James refers to sickness. Thus, if majority opinion is to be factored into the equation, it must rest clearly on the side of physical weakness/sickness.

## Bibliography

- Ajibade, Ezekiel A. "Anointing the Sick with Oil: An Exegetical Study of James 5:14–15." *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 13, no. 2 (2008): 166–77.
- Amerding, Carl. "Is Any Among You Afflicted: A Study of James 5:13–20." *BibSac* 95, no. 378 (1938): 195–201.
- Carson, D. A. and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
- Collins, C. John. "James 5:14–16a: What is the Anointing For?" *Presbyterion* 23, no. 2 (1997): 79–91.
- Hayden, Daniel R. "Calling the Elders to Pray." *BibSac* 138, no. 551 (1981): 258–66.
- Hayes, Doremus Almy. "James, Epistle Of." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr, et al. 3:1562. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939.
- Hughes, R. Kent. *James: Faith that Works*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton: Crossway, 1991.
- Karris, Robert J. "Some New Angles on James 5:13–20." *Review and Expositor* 97 (2000): 207–19.
- Kent, Homer A. Jr., *Faith that Works: Studies in the Epistle of James*. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1986.
- Köstenberger, Andreas J., L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009.
- Lenski, R. C. H. *The Interpretation of the Epistle of St. James*. Commentary on the New Testament. Augsburg; Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998.
- Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.
- MacArthur, John Jr. *James*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody, 1998.
- Mayor, Joseph B. *The Epistle of James*. London: Macmillan, 1913; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990.
- McCartney, Dan G. *James*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.
- McKnight, Scot. *The Letter of James*. NICNT. Ed. Gordon D. Fee. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

- Moo, Douglas J. *The Letter of James*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Ed. Leon Morris. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.
- Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.
- Oesterley, W. E. *The General Epistle of James*. In vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Greek Testament*. Ed. W. Robertson Nicoll. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961.
- Omanson, Roger L. "The Certainty of Judgment and the Power of Prayer: James 5." *Review and Expositor* 83, no. 3 (1986): 427–38.
- Pickar, Charles. "Is Anyone Sick Among You?" *CBQ* 7, no. 2 (1945): 165–74.
- Seifrid, Mark A. "The Waiting Church and Its Duty: James 5:13–18." *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 3 (2000): 32–38.
- Thiessen, Henry Clarence. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943.
- Thomas, John Christopher. "The Devil, Disease and Deliverance." *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 2 (1993): 25–50.
- Toner, Patrick. "Extreme Unction." In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 5. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909.
- Warrington, Keith. "James 5:14–18: Healing Then and Now." *International Review of Mission* 93, nos. 370–71 (2004): 346–67.
- Ziegler, John J. "Who Can Anoint the Sick?" *Worship* 61, no. 1 (1987): 25–44.