

# Views of Prayer: A Sacred Cow?

BY DAVID POSEY

If I wanted to ignite a firestorm among Christians, at least in some churches, all I would have to do is question the typical way men pray. If Hindus have their literal “sacred cow” we have our virtual one: “don’t mess with my view of prayer.”

The typical Christian believes that prayer is really important. That’s good and true because it is. James says flatly that we “do not have because we do not ask” (James 4:2) and Jesus encouraged frequent and persistent prayer (Luke 18:1-8).

Jesus even gives us a model prayer in Matthew 6. But it’s what Jesus says about prayer there that some have, possibly, ignored. First, that model prayer is really short. I hate to admit this, but when I was a kid, some brethren’s prayers were so long, my friends and I started timing them. The record-length prayer, if I recall, was over 12 minutes! The model prayer, recorded in Matthew 6:9-13, can be said, even talking slowly, in well under a minute. But just try saying something about long prayers in the average church and you’ll make some people mad.

In fact, if you say anything about prayer that challenges the orthodox views of some brethren, you’re walking on a razor’s edge.

For example, what if someone happens to question the frequency and priority of praying for those who are sick or “on beds of affliction” in some way. Praying for the sick is a sacred cow that you better not tip over.

Yet...*careful now*... how many prayers do you read in the New Testament in which the primary focus of the prayer is for the sick? That pesky old rule of “speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11) can get in the way of what we *think* the Bible says.

Here are the facts: in the model prayer of Jesus, there is no reference whatsoever to praying for those who are sick. In Jesus’ intercessory prayer, in John 17, there is no reference to those who are sick. In the book of Acts, when brethren were literally being killed because of their faith, and when illness was a huge problem, there are no recorded prayers for the sick (unless I missed something). When Paul prays in Ephesians 3, he starts off with this: “*For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father...*” then follows with requests that have nothing to do with physical illness and everything to do with spiritual health.

The *healing* of the sick in the gospels and Acts tells us that God cares about us when we are ill. In Philippians 2:25-27, Paul mentions that Epaphroditus was ill, near death “*but God had mercy on him...*” So, we are entitled to infer that God sometimes intervenes in cases of illness. Yet Paul never says he prayed to God for the healing of Epaphroditus (that is not to say he didn’t, but he doesn’t mention it).

We learn in I Corinthians 12, that Paul did pray for God to take away his “thorn in the flesh.” But there is no proof that the thorn was a health issue. (I lean toward the view that Paul’s “thorn” was the persecution and hardship he mentions in chapter 11. And, in any event, God said “no” to Paul in that case).

Some will point to James 5:13-16, and say, “Look! Here is a command to pray for the sick.” Let’s take a closer look at that text.

James tells those who are suffering to pray (presumably for themselves, as David does in Psalm 6). In v. 14, he tells those who are sick to “call for the elders” who are to anoint him with oil and pray over him. But the emphasis in this text is clearly on the spiritual health of the person who is sick. What do elders have to do with physical healing? Clearly, the “raising up” and the “healing” that is guaranteed in vv. 15-16 is *spiritual* healing. We are to “confess our sins” to each other and pray for spiritual health for each other — that’s the “great power” that a righteous person has in prayer.

But how often do we pray for each other’s spiritual health, either in private or in public? Prayers for the physically sick outnumber prayers for each others’ spiritual health ten to one or ten to zero. Look at James 5 again. Verse 15 says “the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick...” There is no condition or disclaimer mentioned there: it is an *iron-clad promise* to “save the one who is sick.” Does that mean that if a righteous person will *only pray hard enough*, then God will save every sick person he prays for?

If so, I’ve got a question for you: was there not at least *one* righteous person fervently praying for Andrew Westphal, a young lad of 29 years, to be healed? And if so, what happened? How about Frances Kaler or Blake Dickey or Larry Cain or Kathy Wilson or .... ? If this is a solid promise from God, who cannot lie (Titus 1:2), then what’s going on? In fact, would anyone ever die?

But look at the text again: v. 15 says, “if he has *committed sins*, he will be forgiven.”

Then v. 16,

Therefore, *confess your sins* to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Then James uses Elijah as an example of the power of prayer: he prayed, no rain; prayed again, rain. But then James comes right back to a spiritual application in vv. 19-20:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that *whoever brings back a sinner* from his wandering will save his soul from death and will *cover a multitude of sins*.

It is not difficult to discern James’ main concern. It is clearly not the *physical* health of a sick man but the *spiritual* health of that man, and all others, even the brother who has wandered from the truth.

But, having said all that, saying all that is not popular in churches today. Praying for the sick is what we do — in spades!! Praying for each others’ spiritual health is much less

common; in fact, it is nearly absent from some prayers. When we have “prayer services,” is it usually in response to someone’s serious illness not to pray for the spiritually sick (while we often mention the latter, it sounds like an afterthought).

Unfortunately, every biblical subject attracts extremists at one end of the spectrum or the other. So, there are those who would be upset at the notion that we should put less emphasis on our prayers for the sick and focus more on spiritual needs. But at the other extreme are those who teach that we should not pray for physical things at all, including the sick.

I’m not suggesting that we do not pray for the sick — *pray for me if I get sick, OK?* I’m challenging our priorities and emphasis. Someone said, “*we pray harder to keep sick saints out of heaven than we pray to keep sick sinners out of hell.*” That’s a good point that is illustrated in just about every assembly.

Physical sickness, by its very nature, is temporary; eternal sickness, is forever. When John speaks of prayer, his emphasis is clear enough. He says, in I John 5:13-16,

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.

After you read this, the next time you bow your head, what will take precedence in your prayer? Physical things? Physical health? Or, praying for brothers who needs *spiritual* strength? What’s more important?

Again, I am not suggesting that we are not to pray for the sick. But, as in all requests, we should think about what we are asking God to do. We can ask God to heal him and/or to comfort him or to comfort his family in cases where the illness is extreme. There are lots of requests that fit the occasion.

But let’s not make our view of the way we pray for the sick a “sacred cow” that can’t be questioned. If prayer for the sick and suffering is supposed to be the primary focus of our prayers, then we would expect to find a veritable plethora of such prayers in the New Testament; after all, Christians were suffering mightily in the first century. Yet, prayers for physical safety, healing and protection are notable, mainly for how rare they are compared to requests for spiritual help.

It’s not a matter of one thing or the other, it’s a matter of focus, a matter of perspective, and making the main thing is *the main thing*. And the *main* thing is getting to heaven and helping each other get to heaven. Paul viewed suffering from that perspective, as he wrote in Romans 8:18:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

One more thing. When we pray for the person who is sick, we should remember the promise that God makes in James 1:5 that he will give wisdom to those who boldly ask for it. We can't control the prognosis of the sick person, but we can count on God to help us be wise, whether we are a loved one, a caregiver, or the sick person himself.

In my sermon last week on "contentment," I said that suffering tends to make us self-centered. Asking God to give the sick person — and those around him — wisdom, is smart. We need wisdom to deal with the situation, so we do not get bitter or angry or fall into the trap of self-pity.

We can also ask God to strengthen the sick person, as Paul says, in Philippians 4:13. The key is to circle back to thinking about the eternal and not get stuck in the physical. Remember that Paul, who was being "poured out as a drink offering" (Philippians 2:17), said in 1:21, "for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Meanwhile, he says, he learned how to be content in *all* circumstances (4:11).

We can do that, if we find our strength in Christ.