

Prayer and Healing (James 5:13-20)

By David Feddes

Today we are going to finish our study of the book of James. The final verses of James focus on prayer and healing.

¹³ Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. ¹⁹ My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. (James 5:13-20).

James ends where he began. Remember how the book of James begins: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of various kinds,” and, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God” (James 1:2, 5). Dealing with troubles and praying is how James begins his letter, and it’s how he ends his letter: “Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.”

Troubled or happy?

You face troubles of various kinds. It may be troubles related to sickness, whether of the body or of the spirit, or depression, or being downcast, or constantly worried and troubled. It may be financial problems, inability to earn a living. It may be troubles that are more spiritual in nature. It may be problems in society, getting picked on, or the threat of being canceled by those who oppose you for being a Christian. Whatever these troubles are, the simple question is: is anyone of you in trouble? What do you do? Pray.

That’s actually a pretty simple summary of the Christian life: trouble and praying, trouble and praying. You’re going to have trouble almost without ceasing, so pray without ceasing, because part of the skill of living as a Christian in this world is navigating through trouble, and prayer—asking for God’s help—is the way to do that.

But it’s not all trouble. “Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.” If things are going your way, if you’re healthy, if the people you love are healthy, if they’re learning well, if their life is going well, if you experience flourishing and the people around you are flourishing, you’re not meant to just say, “Ah, that’s nice. Life is going well. I feel good about it.” When things are going well, don’t forget, because that can sometimes be more dangerous to you spiritually than those troubled times. If you’re happy, then praise God. Sing songs of praise.

I suppose we really do need to sing at the end of today's service rather than saying, "Don't sing, or we might catch Covid." It would be kind of hard to read this passage and then say, "Well, let's head out of here without singing any songs, because there's only a 99.8 percent chance that we'll survive if we get a bug that we probably won't get anyway." We probably will sing near the end. Again, it's okay if you need to be somewhere else for that, but "Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise."

Don't forget that the most serious sin, the most common way of going wrong, is not praising. If you read the book of Romans and see what starts off the whole chain reaction of all kinds of terrible sins, it's that "they didn't glorify God or give Him thanks" (Romans 1:21). God sent them good stuff. He made Himself obvious as Creator, and they didn't praise Him. They didn't thank Him. And so their happiness turns sour, it curdles, and their souls are poisoned. If you don't want your soul to be poisoned, then when life is going well, praise God.

Oh, and by the way, don't forget what it said at the beginning of James: even if life isn't going well, even if you're having troubles, praise God. Consider it all joy because God's doing great things even through your sufferings. So if you're in trouble or if you're happy—and a lot of us actually are both at the same time—we've got various troubles and we've got a variety of reasons to be happy. So be praying for God's help, and at the same time be praising God.

If you read the New Testament epistles, you'll find that near the end of many of them there is a call to prayer, because whatever the doctrinal teaching is, whatever the errors are that need correcting, one thing we always need to hear is "pray" and "praise."

Pray and anoint

"Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord." You see what you do? You call on the leaders of the church, not because they necessarily have a lot greater power than anybody else, but because they are there to represent the Lord and to represent the people of God. They represent the prayers of all of God's people. So if you're laid up and can't get together with God's people, the elders, as the representatives of God's people, can come to you and offer prayers for you on behalf of God's people. And as they do that, they do it in the name of the Lord and, according to James, with the anointing of oil.

Now some of you who are really into essential oils will say, "Yeah, I knew it all along—essential oils, that's the way to go." Actually, though, it's probably not the healing powers of the oil itself that's so important, although sometimes olive oil and other things were used for skin problems, for healing, and for cleansing of wounds. Sometimes they'd cleanse a wound with wine and then use oil to soothe it. However that may be, the Bible does call us to use the anointing oil.

Even in the Bible, when the disciples were sent out by Jesus, it says, "They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them" (Mark 6:12-13). So this was a practice of the disciples. It was a practice of the elders of the church in Jerusalem to anoint people with oil and to heal them.

Sometimes Jesus Himself, though we never read of Him anointing people with oil, would use physical props in a sense as the way He conveyed healing. You remember some of those stories. Some of you may say, “Oh, that’s a little gross,” or, “That’s not very good social distancing or very sanitary,” because Jesus finds a man who is deaf and dumb—he can’t hear and he can’t speak. So Jesus sticks His fingers in both of the man’s ears, then He spits and puts some of the spit on the man’s tongue. And all of a sudden, the man can talk and hear again.

He finds another man who is blind. He comes to that blind man, spits, and puts the spit on both of the man’s eyes—and the man can see again. Jesus used something physical to convey the power of God in healing.

So when James is calling on people, and the elders in particular, to use anointing oil when they’re praying over somebody, there is precedent in the ministry of the disciples and also in the way that Jesus would use physical props to bring His healing. Some who study this passage ask whether what James is saying is to use the medicine but also use prayer—the oil having medicinal properties—so that you’re using the medical means available and also the power of prayer.

There’s a lot of wisdom and truth in that. When medical means are available, don’t forsake them, ignore them, or despise them. You can use those and at the same time be praying for people’s healing. But the use of the anointing oil is not so much because of its medical powers as the way that anointing oil was often used in the Scriptures. It was used to consecrate. If you know the Old Testament, you know the stories of people who were going to become kings—they would be anointed with oil. People who were going to become prophets or priests would be anointed with oil. They were consecrated, which means set apart as special.

Here the anointing is setting the sick person apart as special. Bible scholar Douglas Moo says, “As the elders pray, they’re to anoint the sick person in order to symbolize that the person is being set apart for God’s special attention and care.” So the anointing is probably not just referring to medicine but is a symbol or a sign that the person is being set apart and that God has a special concern and interest in healing them.

When we think about the oil, whatever we make of it, notice that it doesn’t say the oil heals. It is “the prayer offered in faith” that makes the sick person well—or maybe, to be even more accurate, it’s not even the prayer offered in faith, although that does make sick people well, but “the Lord who raises him up.” And then not only does the Lord raise him up, but James adds, “If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.”

Raised, healed, forgiven

There’s a lot going on in these verses. One thing is the word for “make well.” It’s simply *sozo*, which means “to save.” When you’re translating in the New Testament, it’s hard to know whether to translate this word as *heal* or *save* because it’s the very same word that refers to salvation from sin and from hell. The same word is used to speak of healing from illness.

Another word in this verse that's very important is "the Lord will raise him"—*egeiro*. The Lord will raise or resurrect. It's the very same word that means "I take you by the hand, I lift you up so you can stand again." That same word "rise" that Jesus would speak to sick people is also the word used for being resurrected from the dead. So these are very powerful words that can sometimes have double meaning. To be healed is also to be saved. To be lifted up from your sickbed can also be to be resurrected to life forever. The context determines which meaning the words have.

In this context it may have a double meaning—speaking first of a sick person getting better from illness, being able to walk around again and rise up—but it may also refer to the fact that some sick people don't get better, but nonetheless the Lord will save them, and the Lord will raise them up and resurrect them. So when James says, "The Lord will raise him up; the Lord will save him or make him well; the Lord will forgive him," those are tremendous statements, tremendous blessings from God that come to us through the power of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The healing is often connected with forgiving, as it is here in James. When you hear the story of Jesus, He healed many, many people and often attracted enormous crowds so that sick people couldn't even get to Him.

One time there was a man who was unable to walk, and he had some buddies who brought him to Jesus on a stretcher. They couldn't get to Him, so they went up on the roof, tore a hole in the roof, and lowered him down in front of Jesus. The first thing Jesus said when He saw the man was, "My son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). He didn't comment on his sickness or anything like that. First of all, He said, "Your sins are forgiven." Immediately that provoked a reaction from Jesus' opponents: "Why does this man speak like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7).

Well, yes—but Jesus is God speaking words of forgiveness. So Jesus says to them, "Which is easier—to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," He said to the paralytic, "I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home." And the man rose, picked up his mat, and was completely healed (Mark 2:9-12).

There's another story very similar, in which Jesus comes to a man at the pool of Bethesda. At this pool, He finds a man who has been crippled for thirty-eight years. Jesus says to him, "Do you want to be healed?" That's actually a legitimate question because sometimes people can get so stuck in their condition that they don't want it to change anymore, because then there would be some responsibility and they would need to take action again. But anyway, Jesus asks, "Do you want to be healed?" and he says, "Well, I do, but I can never get into the water when it's stirred up," because they believed that when the pool of Siloam or Bethesda was stirred up, the first one in would get healed.

So Jesus says to the man, "Rise, take your mat, and walk." Again, that word *rise* is the same word for *resurrect*. He raises him up, and the man is able to walk again. Then Jesus says to the man, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John 5:14).

Notice how in both of these healings that Jesus did, He gave forgiveness of sins and He also gave physical healing—and the two seem to be connected somewhat. “My son, your sins are forgiven; rise, pick up your mat, and go home.” “Rise, take your mat, and walk. See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”

Sickness and sin

- Sometimes a sickness is due to personal sin. Healing is hindered until sin is forgiven.
- Sometimes a sickness is not due to personal sin or unbelief. God may have other purposes.

Sometimes you can have it where a sickness is due to personal sin, and healing is hindered until that sin is dealt with, until that sin is forgiven. But don't jump to conclusions and say, “Well, James seems to connect healing and forgiveness, and Jesus in some of His miracles connected healing and forgiveness, so that means when I come across somebody who is sick, the first thing I need to do is dig around and find out what they did wrong, find out how they sinned, and then when we deal with the sin, we can also deal with the sickness, and all will be well.”

Sometimes that is actually the case, where a sin needs to be dealt with as well as a sickness—and sometimes it's not. You remember the story of Job. Job suffered terribly, losing his family and his property and going through a terrible physical sickness in which he was in excruciating pain day after day. Was that because he was an especially bad guy who had sinned blatantly against the Lord and needed this sickness to straighten him out? The Bible says—God says Himself in Job—“There is no one on earth like Job; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8). And we know that Job's suffering that came upon him was not due to his sin.

There's a story in Jesus' ministry where He's walking along and comes upon a blind man—a man who's been blind from birth. He's asked the question, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:2-3).

Jesus says, don't think that he's blind because he did something wrong or because his dad or mom did something wrong. It's because God had a special purpose for his problem, and now God is going to display His might, His glory, in his life. So Jesus spits on the ground and, while saying, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5), He makes mud with the saliva. He has a purpose in His miracles too—He's going to show that He's the light of the world. He makes the mud, puts it on the man's eyes, and says, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (John 9:7). The man washes in the pool of Siloam, and when the mud is off and the dirt is off, so is the blindness—and he can see perfectly. He comes to know Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

So you have Job, and you have this man, where it's explicitly said in the Bible that it was not their sin, and yet they went through serious sickness or serious disability. “The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven” (James 5:15). Don't miss that word *if*. That's a very important word here. *If* he has

sinned. There are some cases where sin and sickness are connected, and in those circumstances the Lord can bring not only physical healing but also that tremendous forgiveness that only Christ can bring. We all need forgiveness, of course. But there are many sicknesses that aren't directly connected to your personal sin. So if he has sinned, he'll be forgiven. But don't assume that somebody has sinned just because they're going through a time of affliction or illness.

The prayer of faith

- Overall faith in God makes possible each prayer of faith in a particular situation.
- As we relate with God and partner in His mission, God may grant a special gift of knowing what God is about to do.
- This knowing enables us to pray a completely confident prayer because we already know God's intent.

What's meant by the "prayer of faith" that will raise him up? Overall faith in God is trusting in God to care for you and watch over you, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is trusting Him to be your Savior and trusting Him enough to want Him to run your life, to be your Lord, your Master, your Guide. Real faith involves that kind of life where God forgives you and God takes over.

Here the "prayer of faith" is referring probably to something more specific. Overall faith in God—the kind of faith I've just been talking about—makes it possible to have a prayer of faith in a particular situation. The idea is this: as we relate to God and work with Him in His mission, there are times when God will grant a special gift of knowing what He's about to do. When you know what He's about to do, then you simply speak a word or pray it, and it happens. That knowing enables you to pray a completely confident prayer because you already know God's intent.

Prayer with authority

- The more we are in tune with Jesus and his mission, the more our prayers bring about things authorized by God.
- In the new creation, our words and work will rule reality. Totally in tune with God, we will know his intent exactly, pray with certainty, speak words that always come true, and succeed all we work at.

So there may be times when the prayer of faith simply comes in your walk with God, when He has shown you what He's about to do, and when you pray, you know it's going to happen—and you pray it, and it happens. This prayer of faith is a prayer with authority. The more we're in tune with Jesus and with His mission, the more our prayers bring about things authorized by God.

If you look at it in the big picture, when we fully arrive in God's new creation, then human beings—us—our words and our work will rule reality. When we're totally in tune with God, we'll always know His intent exactly, and we'll be able to pray with certainty and speak words that always come true and succeed in everything we do.

Right now, we live in the era of “already and not yet,” where the powers of the age to come have already come into this age but not yet as fully as they will. Our knowledge of God and our ability to do what God has authorized is not yet as full or complete as it will be in the future. That means that sometimes we’re not going to be able to pray that prayer of faith with full authority, knowing exactly how God is going to answer even before we speak it.

Does that mean, then, that the elders should only come and pray when they’ve got a special message from God that for sure it’s going to work this time? I don’t think so. The Bible just says if you’re sick, you pray, and the elders should show up with the anointing oil and prayers.

Prayer with humility

- Specific faith for healing is God’s gift, not something to psych yourself into.
- Prayer didn’t heal Paul’s “thorn.”
- Prayer didn’t instantly heal Paul’s friends Epaphroditus and Trophimus.
- We don’t know what will happen. “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live” (4:15-15)

Specific faith for healing in a particular circumstance is God’s gift, and it’s not something you should try to psych yourself into. If you’re an elder and you say, “Boy, it depends on the prayer of faith, and I’ve got to have enough faith or this person’s not going to get healed,” or if you’re the sick person and you say, “God’s not going to heal me unless I have enough confidence in my mind to bring that healing down,” that can be very dangerous. Then you spend a lot of time just working on your own brain, trying to work up enough belief that something’s going to happen.

Take note of this: in the Bible, Paul prayed repeatedly for some sort of physical problem—he called it a “thorn in the flesh”—to be removed, and it wasn’t removed (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). We read in Paul’s letters of his friend Epaphroditus, who was sick and nearly died, and Paul was so relieved when he didn’t die (Philippians 2:27). But if you could just snap your fingers and bring down healing every time someone was sick, you’d never have a circumstance like that. There’s another time when they left Trophimus sick in a certain city while they moved on (2 Timothy 4:20). It’s obvious that even the mighty prayers of Paul did not bring down physical healing immediately every time in every circumstance.

So, though we can pray with authority—especially if God gives special knowledge that specific healing is going to happen—we don’t always know what’s going to happen. James has just said as much in the previous verses: you say you know what’s going to happen, but you don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. You don’t know if you’ll even be alive tomorrow. You don’t know what you’ll do tomorrow. So we have to live in humility and pray with humility.

Saved, raised, forgiven

And yet, having said all that, pray with confidence, because sometimes God is going to give that immediate and amazing healing and do things far beyond what you could have believed. Every time the church as a whole—and the representatives of the church—are praying for someone in those circumstances, God is going to do something. He’s going to send power; He’s going to

send healing. What form it takes we don't always know, but God is going to answer those prayers for healing.

Here's a fairly literal translation: "And the prayer of faith will save the sick; the Lord will raise him; if he has sinned, he will be forgiven" (James 5:15). Again, you could understand that in two ways: He's going to get that person out of their sickbed and make them well and whole right now. But look at the words: He's going to *save* him and *raise* him. That's what happens to Christian people. God saves them and raises them and forgives them. Whenever you come and pray, you're bringing His salvation, His resurrection power, His forgiveness into that situation.

And you speak to God, and you speak His words of salvation and resurrection and forgiveness into that situation. Sometimes that brings the healing right then and there. Of course, it's only going to be temporary. We're all going to pass away—it's going to happen. All faith healers that I know of eventually die. It's appointed for people once to die and then to face judgment (Hebrews 9:27). But when we pray, people are going to be healed, and people are going to be saved.

Priestly sacraments?

- **Extreme unction:** anointing of the sick by a priest is a Catholic sacrament for the dying
- **Penance:** confession to a priest is a Catholic sacrament for sinners
- **James is not talking about sacraments done by priests**

This passage has been very important in the development of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church developed an entire system of various sacraments by which your sins are taken care of in different situations. The overall system is based on a couple of very serious errors. One is that the church is the dispenser of God's grace, and that God won't do it directly without the intervention of a priest representing the church. The other is that every time you commit a serious sin, you fall out of your salvation again, and so if you commit that sin and it's not taken away before you die, then you will perish forever.

The biblical teaching is that when you are forgiven, you are made right with God forever, and any sins that you commit later—even if they're serious—can't remove you from God's hand again. But if you have a system where everybody who commits a sin has fallen out of salvation until there's a sacrament tailor-made for that situation to get rid of that sin and make you right with God again, so that you're in good standing, that of course makes the church and its officials very powerful. It also means that you constantly have to have these rituals that make you right with God again.

One ritual that comes from this passage in the Roman Catholic understanding is what's sometimes called *extreme unction* or *anointing of the sick*. When somebody is near the very end of life, a priest is called, and the person is anointed. It's a sacrament for the dying to get rid of mortal sins before facing the Lord. The other sacrament is the sacrament of *penance* or sometimes called *confession*, where you go to a priest and confess your sins. Then, through that sacrament, the priest says, "I absolve you" (in Latin, *ego te absolvo*), and your sin is then absolved by the priest—it's taken away. Though you may have committed that mortal sin,

through this sacrament that sin is removed from you, and now you're in the clear again until you need to confess again.

So two of the sacraments of the sacramental system are actually connected to this passage, according to the Roman Church: the anointing of the dying, and confessing to a priest. Because remember, it says, "Confess your sins to one another," and it also speaks of anointing so that someone can be forgiven and raised up.

It's important to understand what James is saying in the original context. Those Roman Catholic concepts of anointing the dying and confessing to a priest didn't arise until hundreds of years later in the life of the church. James is not talking about priests who do a special sacrament that gets rid of someone's sins that otherwise they'd be stuck with. Notice that he says, "Confess your sins *to each other*" (James 5:16). He's not saying there's a special booth where you go, and there's a special person appointed to hear you out and then tell you you're okay, maybe even give you a few things to do to make it okay. He's not describing a sacrament of confession or penance supervised by a priest.

But be very careful here, because if you say, "Well, it's not what the Roman Catholic Church came to understand it to be," you can make the total opposite mistake and say, "Therefore, confession doesn't matter." Once you've said it doesn't mean what the Roman Catholic hierarchy took it to mean, you still have to ask, "What *does* it mean?"

Each other

- Be open about sins & struggles.
- Pray expectantly for healing from sickness and saving from sin.

It means that we confess our sins to each other when we need to. It means we're open about our struggles. We don't go to church or hang out with church people pretending we've got it all together. Sometimes we're so self-sufficient and so embarrassed about showing any sign of weakness that we won't even talk about our physical sicknesses to each other. We certainly don't want to say much about emotional problems we might have, or mental illnesses we might struggle with. Shame, shame, double shame—we never want anybody to know about that. And when it comes to our sins, perish the thought that we would ever tell anybody else about what we're struggling with.

So don't take any comfort at all in the notion that, "Well, I guess now that I avoid the confession booth with the priest, I'm doing the right thing." No—that just means you didn't go with that particular route taken by that particular church. But if you never admit you're wrong, if you've got struggles and never talk to anybody else about them, then you need to hear the message of James to you today: be more open about that. It doesn't mean you blab to everybody all the time about everything you ever did, but it does mean that you're more transparent, more willing to say, "I'm wrong about this," or, "I'm struggling with this," or, "This is a real difficulty in my life."

If we say, “Well, you’re not necessarily going to go to hell if you didn’t get the last rites, if someone didn’t come and apply extreme unction,” okay—maybe not. It’s correct doctrine to say you don’t need extreme unction or anointing by a priest to enter heaven and be cleansed of all sin. But that’s not at all to say, “Therefore, we shouldn’t pray for the sick, we shouldn’t call on the elders to come and pray for them representing God’s people, we don’t need to use that anointing, who cares about that stuff.”

When you have what James says, it’s not enough to say, “It doesn’t mean what the Catholics say.” You always have to take the next step and say, “But what does it mean?” At least the approach of some Roman Catholics who actually go and confess their sins to their priest and are talking about them with someone, dealing with them—there may be some ways in which that’s healthier than having your lips zipped all the time. It would be a great error to think the priest has the power to forgive you, but many people are going to be healthier if they’re talking to somebody about their struggles than if they’re talking to nobody.

So let me urge you again in the words of James: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Don’t forget that word “healed” can also mean “saved.” We’re not truly saving each other and bringing God’s salvation by our prayer—that’s the work of Jesus Christ—but healing and salvation often come through praying for others.

Prayer power

“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). I’ve spent a little time dealing with things we have to think about and challenges to sorting through what something means and doesn’t mean, but don’t forget the core of it: prayer has power. Prayer has power. So if you don’t get anything else I’m saying, or if you disagree with some point, can you handle this one? Prayer has power!

“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” And then I love the next words—and always have to laugh—because when I read, “Elijah was a man just like us” (James 5:17), I think, yeah right! Aside from calling down fire from heaven repeatedly, blasting his enemies to smithereens, and controlling the weather, he was a guy just like me! But James, or rather God through James, says, “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it wouldn’t rain, and it didn’t. He prayed again, and it poured” (James 5:17-18).

Those of you who aren’t so familiar with the Old Testament or those stories, let me just tell the story of Elijah again—at least part of it. He was a man just like us, and he lived in very difficult times under the rule of the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They made popular the worship of the god Baal, and people were abandoning the worship of the Lord, the true and living God, for the worship of this Baal idol.

Elijah prayed—we don’t actually read in the Old Testament that he prayed, but James tells us that he did—and he prayed that something would change in this messed-up society. Be careful when you pray. Some of us may be praying for revival. We may see what’s happening in our own civilization and culture and be praying about that, and sometimes the Lord is going to direct prayers in a little different direction than we expected when we started praying. The Lord is

going to do some things that get very uncomfortable. Elijah prayed, and the next thing you know, there was a drought. Elijah even asked for the drought because he knew that these people—this king, this queen, this nation—needed something to shake it up and change it.

He went in and announced to King Ahab, “There will be no rain again until I say so” (1 Kings 17:1). Then he left, and things got drier and drier and drier. It got extremely difficult in the land of Israel for everybody—for the animals, for the people. Then after those years, Elijah went to Ahab and said, “It’s time we got together again. I want you to call all the people of Israel, and I want to have a showdown. I want to speak to the people of Israel, and it’s time we figured out who’s really the boss—the Lord or Baal.”

So Elijah stands up and gives a speech to the people there on Mount Carmel, near the sea, in the territory where Baal was expected to be especially powerful. He stands and says, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If Baal is God, then serve him. If the Lord is God, serve Him. But don’t pretend you can serve all of the above” (1 Kings 18:21). That doesn’t work.

Let me just pause there. What’s one of the biggest problems in the book of James? Wavering. Double-mindedness. Double talk. Going back and forth, back and forth. And Elijah says to these people, “How long are you going to waver between two opinions? If Baal is God, serve him. If the Lord is God, serve Him.”

Then he says, “Here’s the deal: I want an altar built by the prophets of Baal, and they can sacrifice a bull on it, and I will make an altar to the Lord and cut up a bull and lay it on it. Then we’re going to wait. It’s a clear sky—we’ll see if lightning or fire from heaven comes down and burns up the offering. Whichever god sends the fire from heaven—that’s the true God.”

So the prophets of Baal do their thing. They kill the bull, they dance around, but they’re not getting many results. Elijah starts snickering at them a little bit and says, “Hey, maybe Baal had to go to the bathroom or something—he hasn’t shown up yet!” They’re dancing around, and as is their custom, they start cutting themselves because they think if the blood flows and they do more extreme things, maybe Baal will come through. But nothing happens.

Then Elijah builds his altar to the Lord, lays the bull on it, and just for special effect says, “Now bring some water jars and pour water on it. Now get some more water, pour more water on it.” He makes it really, really difficult for God—it’s going to be tough for God to burn this thing up! Then he prays. He says, “Lord, let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant” (1 Kings 18:36-37). The prophets of Baal had been dancing and yelling all day; Elijah prays for about thirty seconds. “Lord, please show that You are God and that I am Your prophet.” Boom. The water’s gone, the sacrifice is gone, the stones are burned up, and the prophets of Baal are put to shame and wiped out.

God, in answer to one prayer from Elijah, blasts that whole thing. Then Elijah says, “Hey, the sky is clear—we just had lightning that wiped out the offering—but you know what? I hear the sound of rain” (1 Kings 18:41). Nobody else hears the sound of rain—except maybe for the thunder that came with that bolt of fire from heaven—but the sky is still clear. Elijah knows

something's up. So he prays that the Lord will send rain. Then he says to his assistant, "Now go to the sea and look and see what you see."

The servant says, "Blue sky everywhere. I don't see any sign of rain." So Elijah prays again and sends him over to the sea and says, "Check it out. Tell me what you see." "Pretty much the same, boss. Blue skies. No sign of rain." Elijah prays again and again and again—seven times he prays and sends his assistant to check out the weather forecast. Finally, the seventh time the servant says, "I see this little itty-bitty cloud over there about the size of a man's hand." Elijah says, "Let's get out of here—it's going to pour!" He tells Ahab, "You better get out of here—there's going to be a terrible downpour. You better get out of here as fast as you can."

Then Elijah tucks his robe into his belt and takes off running. He outruns the chariots and horses of King Ahab and gets to shelter before Ahab can make it. He was running through a downpour probably worse than we had this morning. There's this tremendous downpour.

Now James says, "Elijah was a man just like us" (James 5:17). We laugh, but think about it. Do you really think Elijah did all that? Do you think God is not the same God—the God of Elijah, the God of Moses, the God of Jesus Christ, the God of the apostles? Prayer is powerful. Elijah is an example of the kind of power that prayer has.

He prayed that it wouldn't rain, and it didn't. He prayed for fire from heaven, and it obliterated the sacrifice. He prayed that it would rain again, and it took a few tries—seven, to be exact—but on the seventh time that little cloud appeared, and it was time to hightail it out of there because the rain was coming. Prayer has tremendous power, and we, God's people, need to know that.

Elijah was like us. Don't forget, right after that incident, Elijah was depressed and wanted to die. He was ready to pack it in because Jezebel was still against him and wanted him dead. Elijah was a man just like us. He could get down, even very depressed and despairing, even when great things had just happened, even when he'd won tremendous victories. He needed special assurance from God—God's still small voice—to get him back on track in his ministry again (1 Kings 19:9-18).

Maybe you need that. Maybe you say, "Boy, I wish we had fire from heaven to blast something, and then we'd know for sure." But what Elijah really needed even more than that was the still small voice—that gentle whisper that was more than the fire, more than the earthquake, more than the thunder, more than the mighty storms—just to know that God was still there and still working.

And most of the time, He is working in quieter ways. Elijah said, "I'm the only one left." But God said, "Oh no, you're not. I've got seven thousand who have never bowed to Baal" (1 Kings 19:18)—not to mention all those who had just yelled, "The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!" (1 Kings 18:39)—people who could be brought back from the error of their ways.

Sometimes you just need that small voice of God telling you again, "Faith in Me is the right way, and I have My purposes for you, and I'm going to carry them out."

The Bible, speaking of prayer's power, does so in many epistles. Take the very end of the letter of John: "If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him" (1 John 5:14-15). Then notice what he goes on to say next. He's saying prayer has this tremendous power. So how are you going to use that power?

Save wanderers

"If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray, and God will give him life" (1 John 5:16). See that connection? Prayer has tremendous power. So how will you use that power? "Help me get richer? Help me feel better?" No—if you believe that you can get things by praying, then pray for that brother or sister you know who has committed a sin that's not a fatal sin, not the rejection of God or of Jesus or of the Holy Spirit. Pray, and God will give that person life.

That's how James ends his letter. After saying prayer is powerful and effective, he writes, "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20). What a fantastic way to end this letter of James.

If you look at other letters—Galatians, for instance—the last chapter says, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Galatians 6:1). Or Jude—just before his final benediction and blessing—says, "Snatch others from the fire and save them" (Jude 23). These letters were written—and sometimes they're very hard-hitting—but they're written to help people snatch one another from the fire or to restore those who are caught in sin.

We've read the book of James and thought about it in depth. When you read James, you realize that our rosy ideas about that "fantastic early church," which supposedly always had it together and was wonderful, are a little off. James was writing this letter possibly within a decade of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and certainly not more than a couple decades later. He was writing to the Jerusalem church—you know, the one we always think has it all together—and he was writing to them about selfish desires and self-deception, about favoring the rich over the poor. He was writing to them about dead faith that doesn't do godly deeds, about double talk that praises God and then destroys others by the way you talk about them. He talked about doublethink—loving the world and claiming to love God at the same time. He talked about "business as usual," saying, "We're going to do this and that, make money," or about rich fat cats who were ripping off their workers. He talked near the end about wavering and wandering from the faith.

If you look at the kinds of things James warns about and scolds people for, you might say, "Well, that was a pretty messed-up church," or, "He's kind of a mean old preacher." Maybe both! But don't forget what James is up to. He's saying all this because he's trying to turn sinners from the error of their way.

Why is he doing that? Not just to give them a good talking-to or a scolding, but because he knows what God does through that. If you bring somebody back, you're not giving up on them.

You're not saying, "Well, you're double-minded, so I write you off. You have faith without deeds, so I write you off. You can't control your tongue, so I write you off." No—what he's doing is turning them back. And when he does that, he's saving people from death.

You may have done a bunch of things wrong. And as you read the book of James, you realize how serious some of those things are. And yet, at the end of it all, you're not doomed if you turn back from sin to God. All those sins—it may be a multitude of them—are covered over by the blood of Jesus Christ, removed as you repent of them and turn away from them, and your soul is saved from death.

James wants us to have that same attitude. This whole letter talks about wisdom from God, about every good and perfect gift coming from God, about being born again through the Word of God, about being turned from the error of our way and being restored to God, about having our souls saved from death and covering over a multitude of sins, about prayer and the power of prayer, and about the forgiveness and healing that come as we pray to God and pray for one another.

So don't just listen to James and say, "Well, I got a few more pointers from that New Testament author." Think to yourself, "What is God doing in me to save me from death and cover over my multitude of sins? What are the ways He's getting me back on the right path? How is He helping me put faith into real action?" And then, as God does that in you, be ready to help others. Don't say, "Oh, that's their problem." If they're sick, pray for them and help them. If they're struggling, help lift them up. Bring the resurrection power of Christ, bring the saving power of Christ into those situations. When we see one another struggling, pray for each other and help each other get back on that path to salvation once again.

That's how this book ends—and that's how so many New Testament books end. They announce God's grace and salvation, they bring correction about the ways we blow it, and then they remind us that it can all be covered over. You can leave it all behind and keep walking the path that God has given you.

May God give each of us the grace to do just that.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for your Word—for the living Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, and for the written Word. We thank you for the book of James, written by that man of faith, that man of prayer, that man who had such callouses from praying that people called him "camel knees." He knew what he was talking about when he talked about prayer.

Lord, help us to grow in prayer—confident prayer that brings down healing from above, that raises people up from their sickbeds, and that ultimately brings us into the full experience of your resurrection power when you come again.

Lord, we pray that if any right now in our midst have wandered from the truth, you will pour out Your mercy and bring them back and save their souls from death and cover over their multitude of sins.

Help us to be transparent with each other when we struggle. Help us to be more honest with each other so that we can enlist the prayers, counsel, and love of other people and not go through it all alone.

Help us who are elders to have greater wisdom and greater confidence in you as we represent your people and bring the message of salvation—and also pray for the mighty healing power of God in people's lives.

Lord, if there are any who are sick among us or continuing to struggle, help us to enlist that power of prayer on our own behalf as well as through the prayers of the whole church. God, help us to live in the might, truth, and power of your Word. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

Prayer and Healing (James 5:13-20)

By David Feddes

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¹³ Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. ¹⁹ My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Troubled or happy?

¹³ Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

Prayer and anointing by church elders

¹⁴ Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Anoint with oil

They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. (Mark 6:12-13)

Pray and anoint

Anointing often meant consecration.

As the elders pray, they are to anoint the sick person in order to symbolize that the person is being set apart for God's special attention and care. (Douglas Moo)

Sickness healed, sins forgiven

¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well [σώσει save, heal]; the Lord will raise him up [ἐγερει raise, resurrect]. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

“Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’?” But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home.” Do you want to be healed? Rise, take your mat, and walk. See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” (John 5:14)

Raised, healed, forgiven

My son; your sins are forgiven... Rise, pick up your mat, and go home.” (Mark 2:5, 11)

Rise, take your mat, and walk... See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” (John 5:6-14)

Sickness and sin

- Sometimes a sickness is due to personal sin. Healing is hindered until sin is forgiven.
- Sometimes a sickness is not due to personal sin or unbelief. God may have other purposes.

There is no one on earth like Job; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. (Job 2:3)

“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (John 9:2-3)

Sickness healed, sins forgiven

¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well [σώσει save, heal]; the Lord will raise him up [ἐγερῇ raise, resurrect]. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

The prayer of faith

- Overall faith in God makes possible each prayer of faith in a particular situation.
- As we relate with God and partner in His mission, God may grant a special gift of knowing what God is about to do.
- This knowing enables us to pray a completely confident prayer because because we already know God’s intent.

Prayer with authority

- The more we are in tune with Jesus and his mission, the more our prayers bring about things authorized by God.
- In the new creation, our words and work will rule reality. Totally in tune with God, we will know his intent exactly, pray with certainty, speak words that always come true, and succeed all we work at.

Prayer with humility

- Specific faith for healing is God's gift, not something to psych yourself into.
- Prayer didn't heal Paul's "thorn."
- Prayer didn't instantly heal Paul's friends Epaphroditus and Trophimus.
- We don't know what will happen. "If it is the Lord's will, we will live" (4:15-15)

Saved, raised, forgiven

¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the sick. The Lord will raise him. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

Priestly sacraments?

- **Extreme unction:** anointing of the sick by a priest is a Catholic sacrament for the dying
- **Penance:** confession to a priest is a Catholic sacrament for sinners
- **James is not talking about sacraments done by priests**

Each other

¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

- Be open about sins & struggles.
- Pray expectantly for healing from sickness and saving from sin.

Prayer power

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

God hears us

If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. If we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him. If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. (1 John 5:15-16)

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Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.
(Galatians 6:1)

Snatch others from the fire and save them. (Jude 1:23)

Sick with sins

- Selfish desires and self-deception
- Favoring the rich over the poor
- Dead faith without godly deeds
- Doubletalk that destroys with words
- Doublethink that loves wicked world
- Business as usual without God
- Wavering and wandering from faith

Save wanderers

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