

# Pray...

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James 5:13-20

Our final lesson focuses on the continued practice of patiently waiting for the Lord's return and how we ought to conduct ourselves in that time of waiting while facing a season of suffering or trials. This passage instructs us on the practice of continual prayer in that time of waiting. No matter what situation we find ourselves in, the appropriate and first response should be to pray, spending time in communication with the Lord. Not only does it reflect our deep faith, it also reflects our patient endurance as we turn our troubles over to the Lord for his management rather than relying on our own limited understanding and abilities. As we place ourselves in his care and timing in prayer we reveal a truly authentic faith.

James' epistle has been a treatise on practical holiness – living our faith on a daily basis, sometimes moment to moment, enduring suffering with patient endurance, trusting and relying on the Lord for his wisdom, with our attention focused on self-control and restraint in thought, word and action. James now concludes with the effectiveness of prayer in times of suffering and trial by those who continually strive to live a life of practical holiness under intense oppression or suffering. Times of trials and suffering refine our faith and shape our character to reflect the character of the Lord. In Exodus 34:6 God describes himself as merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.<sup>1</sup> Through our suffering we develop these traits, along with the Holy Spirit working in us to strengthen and perfect our faith making us more and more like Christ.

James begins the conclusion of his epistle with an exhortation to prayer. Prayer is the theme of this short passage encompassing the response of prayer in times of trial and rejoicing; the offering of prayers and anointing of the weak by the elders of the church; and the necessity for prayers in times of moral weakness and sin, assuring of the Lord's forgiveness and a restoration to a state of righteousness. James presents an example of the effectiveness of prayer by those who are righteous in the sight of God in the Old Testament story of Elijah. The story of Elijah prepares us for James' final exhortation to put our prayers and mature faith to work in restoring the wayward back to life in Christ.

***...in times of suffering and affliction***

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<sup>1</sup> "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" Ex 34:6 (NRSV)

Frequently people in times of struggle and adversity will turn to prayer as a last resort, as if it is our final option when all other options and efforts have run out. In truth, prayer is the solution to the many struggles and trials we face. When we come to God, first we may be seeking a quick fix or deliverance from that with which we struggle. God may honor that request, but that is not his promise. His promise is to give us the strength and perseverance needed to deliver us

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*His promise is to give us the strength and perseverance needed to deliver us through our trials, not from them.*

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*through* our trials, not *from* them. So when we enter into times of trial, our first response ought to be to pray. James tells us to pray as a response to the suffering we must endure. Stoically enduring our trials in silence will numb the mind against the workings of God, while an angry response will fill the soul with bitterness and hurt. Praying allows us an active response

opening the lines of communication with the Lord. While the prayers may not bring about the removal of the cause of our suffering it will strengthen our endurance in the face of suffering.

Spending time in prayer allows us to come to an understanding of what God is forming and perfecting in us through our suffering. Therefore, prayer is a necessary discipline in the maturation of our faith. But in prayer we must wait, and wait patiently. God's work is never a quick fix, or 12 easy steps. It is time consuming; it is slow and plodding and forces us to learn the disciplines of patience and trust. Eventually there comes a sense of peace and well being in the spirit.

### ***...in times of rejoicing, voicing our gratitude and thanksgiving***

When our times of trial and suffering have ended, James calls us to praise the Lord with prayers and songs of rejoicing. In lifting our hearts in worship, gratitude, and thanksgiving we honor the Lord for his love and compassion. This tells us that in all times and all places we are to turn to the Lord in worship, prayer and praise, seeking his presence constantly.

### ***...when we are overcome with a weak and weary soul***

James turns his focus to prayer for the sick calling the elders of the church to pray and anoint the weak and weary. This passage has caused confusion over the years as to what is meant by "the sick". While physical sickness, disease, and infirmity certainly fall under the heading of suffering, the sickness mentioned by James is more spiritual in nature than physical. The word "sick" is translated from the Greek "*astheneō*"<sup>2</sup> meaning to be weak, especially in a spiritual sense. While the Gospels do use this word to denote physical illness, in Acts and the Epistles it refers to spiritual weakness: faith that is weak or has weakened.<sup>3</sup> James is not addressing the diseased, the ill or infirm in this passage; but rather those who have grown morally and spiritual weak or weary under the onslaught of suffering and trials, in particular the suffering experienced by the Christians oppressed by Romans and Jews because of their faith. Recall that James had just finished exhorting his audience to stand firm in the persecutions they were facing by remembering

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<sup>2</sup> Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

<sup>3</sup> Bible Knowledge Commentary

what the heroes of the faith had suffered at the hands of their persecutors (James 5:10). Therefore it makes sense that his exhortation to pray be directed at the spiritual ramifications of suffering.<sup>4</sup> In 1 Thessalonians 5:14 Paul teaches that the church elders were to “encourage the faint hearted, help the weak”. James instructs that the elders be called to pray for and anoint the one whose faith is faltering. The one whose faith is sick or weary will be restored by the prayers of the elders. He will be spiritually restored and strengthened, made well through the prayers offered in faith by the elders (v.14). The intention behind the prayers and anointing is the firm belief that God alone is the source of spiritual healing. Only he can restore one’s faith from the dangers of weakening and faltering. For this reason the prayers and anointing are done “in the name of the Lord.” The anointing<sup>5</sup> of which James recommends is neither ceremonial nor medicinal, but rather restorative, bestowing honor and refreshment.<sup>6</sup> The woman who poured perfume on Jesus’ feet<sup>7</sup> and the host pouring oil on the head of his guest<sup>8</sup> both reflect this type of anointing – showing care and concern, restoring the tired and weary. The anointing of which James speaks is one that restores, encourages and uplifts the weary soul.<sup>9</sup> Through the prayers and anointing offered in faith on behalf of the discouraged and weary believer, restoration is assured and “and the sick person (v.15)” (literally “weak one” or *asthenōn*) will be made well – restored from discouragement and spiritual defeat. The faithful pleading will call the Lord to action raising up the weary one. The end of verse 15 further supports the idea of spiritual restoration as James continues, “if he has sinned he will be forgiven”. The forgiveness of sin has to do with the spiritual healing of a sin-sick heart. While the elders may pray and anoint the weary Christian, it is God alone who can heal and restore that Christian back to abundant life in Christ.

*And we urge you,  
beloved, to admonish  
the idlers, encourage  
the fainthearted, help  
the weak, be patient  
with all of them.*

*1 Thessalonians 5:14*

### ***...for the sin-sick and sin-stained heart***

Physical sickness can be caused by sin that enters into one’s life when the spirit is weak. For this reason James exhorts believers to pray for and support the weary Christian. Sometimes the sin can be addiction to alcohol or substances causing the sick person to ignore and even reject responsibilities to family and community. Sometimes the sin is a behavior – physical or emotional abuse. Sometimes it is an emotional sickness caused by bitterness or envy. All these things left unaddressed can lead to physical manifestations of illness and disease. God desires to heal all

<sup>4</sup> Physical illness or infirmity may certainly be the cause of suffering, but it is not that which James is here addressing, as we will see as we progress through our passage.

<sup>5</sup> It is significant that the word “anoint” is *aleipsantes* (“rub with oil”) not *chrīō* (“ceremonially anoint”). The former is the “mundane” word and the latter is “the sacred and religious word” —BKC

<sup>6</sup> BKC and Hayden, Daniel R., “Calling the Elders to Pray,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138. July-September 1981:264

<sup>7</sup> Luke 7:38

<sup>8</sup> Luke 7:46

<sup>9</sup> BKC

illnesses caused by sin, if not physically, certainly spiritually. The first step is acknowledging and confessing that sin. The one with the sin sick heart must make amends with those whom he has wronged and forgive those who have wronged him. Confession allows God to enter in and heal the heart of its guilt and bitterness. Upon heartfelt confession and repentance God will forgive sin and restore him to righteousness. The prayers of the righteous – those strong and mature in faith have the power and effectiveness to bring about God's healing. The sin-sick will be made right with God, even if his body still bears the consequences of that sin even unto physical death. God promises to raise him to eternal life.

The condition of righteousness before God, the heart being healed of the disease of sin, will allow one to pray more effectively. If one's heart is mired in guilt, bitterness, envy and a host of other sins not only will he not be able to pray effectively, he may not even discern what to pray for. The one whose righteousness has been restored through prayer and confession has adjusted his priorities and attitude in line with God's will, making his prayers effective and powerful. The righteous man is one who is committed to God's will and building a relationship with the Lord. The word "effective", translated from the Greek "*energeo*", means full of power to achieve results.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the man is righteous either makes his prayers able to be effective and powerful, or that he is enabled by the Holy Spirit to offer powerful and effective prayers. Either way his prayers over a sin-sick person have efficacy and power. Prayer is the component that changes mundane utterances into powerful words allowing healing and transformation to take place.

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### ***...in times of intercession and specific need***

James next introduces Elijah as an example of a righteous man offering prayer on behalf of a sin-sick nation. We are told that "*Elijah was a man just like us*" (v.17) – he had a nature just like ours. He sinned, he wavered, he feared, he sought forgiveness. He was not perfect and yet he was equipped with heavenly gifts and talents, just as we are. He sought and obeyed God in all he did – in victory and in failure. Because of this he was a man who God could use powerfully. It says he "prayed earnestly", he prayed intensely and because Elijah was a man of sincere faith, he discerned God's heart and the prayers he fervently offered were heard and honored by God. The Spirit gave him a heart to discern the will of God and allowed him to pray for certain miraculous events in order to get the attention of the King of Israel and the wayward people of his nation.

The story to which James alludes is recorded in 1 Kings 16-18. In 1 Kings 16:29-30 we are told: "*Ahab son of Omri began to reign over Israel; Ahab son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him.*" Scripture goes on to tell us that Ahab marries Jezebel, the daughter of the Sidonian King. With that marriage also comes adultery to the people of Israel. Jezebel brings the widespread worship of Baal and Ashtoreth into Israel; and under her influence Ahab erects temples and idols throughout the land to these false Gods. The worship of these false gods rapidly

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<sup>10</sup> Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

become the national religion of Israel and in so doing, Israel rejects the Lord. In 1 Kings 16:33 we are told, *“Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him.”* Because of the moral filth and degradation into which Israel has thrown herself under Ahab’s leadership, Elijah, the prophet of God, tells Ahab, *“As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word”* (1 Kings 17:1). The worshippers of Baal believed Baal was responsible for bringing the rains in their seasons and providing abundant harvests. When Elijah announced that God would not allow rain to fall for several years, he was pointing out that Baal was not only powerless to produce rain, but that Israel was embracing false Gods and rejecting the one true and powerful God, Creator of the Universe who could usher in rain at a single word. Not only would there be no rain, there would be no harvests bringing upon Israel a time of judgment and suffering through drought and famine. In a final show down in 1 Kings 18:16-45 Elijah, through prayer, demonstrates the impotence of Baal worship and he reveals the true power of the God of Israel, restoring the people of Israel back to a right relationship with God (v.39). After defeating the Priests of Baal, Elijah fervently prays for the rain to return. Elijah said to Ahab, *“Go up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of rushing rain.” So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees”* (v. 41-42). The next several verses show us Elijah praying with heartfelt conviction and perseverance for the rain to return. Verse 45 says, *“In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain.”* Elijah’s story is a reminder of the power and effectiveness of prayer voiced by a righteous man (or woman!) working in accordance and obedience with God’s direction. Elijah turned a nation of wayward people back to God.

James, in his last few verses, instructs us on how to turn the wayward Christian back to God. The wayward Christian is one who has willfully chosen a path leading away from God, either doctrinally – embracing false beliefs; or practically – making choices in the conduct of their lives that are in opposition to what they profess to believe in. In either circumstance, we are called to turn back the wayward Christian to truth. This concept follows the Jewish view of life leading in two opposing directions: one path leading to life; the other to death. Believers who live in faith and walk in the light of truth are walking a path of life in Christ and eternal life. Those who are walking in the ways of the world, or sin, and rejecting the truth are on a path leading to death – both physical and spiritual. Those Christians who have turned off the path of life are in desperate need for not only intercession, but intervention. Not only prayer, but action on the part of the faithful. This task is not for the faint hearted. More than likely the one seeking to help the lost will be rejected and abused by the errant Christian, who has not asked for the help of the other. Galatians 6:1 gives a warning and instruction on who should attempt to turn back the wayward: *“My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted.”* The one who is called by God to turn back the wayward, must do so “in a spirit of gentleness”, he must first be spiritual: open and discerning to the movement and direction of the Spirit in this undertaking. He must be able to follow the direction of the Lord with gentleness, patience, wisdom

and humility. Those who attempt to turn back the wayward in judgment and condemnation will push him further away doing more harm than good.

James tells us if we are successful in turning the wayward Christian back we have restored him to the path of life and truth. No longer will he be walking a path of destruction and separation from God. The death from which we have restored the wayward is not just spiritual, but physical as well. In the previous verses we have seen how sin can lead to physical illness and even death. Turning him away from his sinful choice may save his life and certainly prevents him from continuing on in his sin bringing harm not only to himself, but possibly others. The love of the Christian who intervenes through prayer, patience, and perseverance covers a multitude of sins.

According to James in times of suffering and affliction, we should pray; in times of healing and relief of suffering, we should pray; in times of spiritual weakness and weariness, we should pray; in times when our hearts are stained with sin, we should pray; in times of specific needs and intercession, we should pray. Our prayers are not a passive last resort, but an active first response to faith. True faith produces prayer opening the way to genuine works.