

Effective Prayer Defined

We have now arrived near the end of James' letter and the passage that has caused difficulties, not for God, but for people, since it was written. Reading James chapter 5 beginning at verse 13, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ⁴ 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. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 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. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit."

The Catholic Church uses this passage to justify their sacrament of Extreme Unction – whereby a priest, as part of the "Last Rites", forgives a person of their sins and prepares the person to pass into eternal life; first to purgatory and then to heaven. The Faith Movement and Church of Christian Science use this passage to teach if one's faith is strong enough they may be healed of any physical sickness. Some believe God uses the anointing of oil by elders to supernaturally heal people. Is this what James is referring to?

After reading James 5, verses 13 to 18 there are questions we may consider. What type of suffering is James referring to in verse 13? What is the type of sickness referred to in verse 14? Are the prayers of elders different or more effective than

that other Christians? What is the purpose of the anointing of oil? Will prayers of faith always save the sick and how are these prayers related to the forgiveness of sins? What kind of healing is one to experience in verse 16? Why does James use the illustration of Elijah stopping the rain in relationship to prayer?

To answer these and other questions it helps to look at the context of this passage – to consider what comes before these 6 verses. One needs to set this passage in its proper place in the theme of what James has been writing and wants his audience to understand. We know that James wrote his letter as stated in verse 1 of chapter 1, “[To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.](#)” Many of the Jewish converts to Christianity had been forced to flee Jerusalem to seek safety. In Acts chapter 8 it is written, “[There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.](#)” ² [Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.](#) ³ [But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.](#)” (Acts 8:1-3) It was a time of mainly Jews, but gentiles also, being persecuted by the leaders of Judaism and specially Pharisee Saul who became the Apostle Paul and these believers scattering to safety. Chapter 5 begins with the brethren being abused and suffering at the hands of the wealthy. Verse 7 says because of this, “[Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.](#)” The theme of James’ letter is steadfast suffering in order to be faithful to Christ until his return.

James now returns to the theme of suffering and calls those being persecuted to pray. One is to pray for spiritual peace and endurance. James knew the key to surviving persecution was prayer that brings one into the realm of God, as Jesus said, “[Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.](#)” (John 14:27) Each believer is indwelt with the Holy Spirit and it is through prayer the

spiritual realm is entered. The elders and pastors are to give pastoral care, which includes prayer. James chapter 5, verses 13 to 18, is not about physical weakness and sickness but about spiritual suffering. It addresses the needs of those who are weak or sick spiritually. James is discussing the relationship between prayer and the relief Gods gives, prayer and our confession of sin and the restoration of right relationship with God. Prayer built upon the faith He gives fosters fellowship among believers and lastly, prayer and the spiritual power it contains.

Pray For Relief

¹³ “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.” James is addressing the believers who are being persecuted and are suffering. The Greek word translated, as “suffering” is *Kakopatheo* and it means generally “to suffer misfortune” or “to endure evil.” James says the right response to spiritual suffering is to pray. This is what James does as well as the other apostles and this is what they teach their flocks to do - pray. This is what Saul once he becomes Paul teaches, ³ “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” (2 Corinthians 1:3-5) It is strange to me that while praying many people do not ask for change of character or of their heart or for God’s strength to endure suffering, but rather plea for a change of circumstance. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor and anti-Nazi dissident who died in a concentration camp 2 weeks before the end of World War II said, “We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts. How can God entrust great things to one who will not thankfully receive from Him the little things?” He led other prisoners to Christ through prayer and the singing of hymns while they were in the

horrible concentration camps and suffered at the hands of the brutal Nazis. He did not ask God to change his circumstance but to give him the strength to endure and beyond endurance to have Christ's peace and comfort so that he could share with others.

James continues by writing if one is suffering **“Let him pray.”** Depending on your translation it may also read, **“He should pray”** or **“Then he must pray.”** What James is saying we must continually be praying. When life is difficult and we may be struggling spiritually we need to pray all the more. When life is going well and easy we need to make sure we do not become complacent and we need to pray continually. During life's good, bad or even mundane times, prayer should remain at the center of our spiritual life. Martin Luther said, **“If I should neglect prayer but a single day, I should lose a great deal of the fire of faith.”** If we are people of prayer in all circumstances we will also be people who are cheerful and joyful for we have the most precious gift – our Lord Jesus. As James continued, **“Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.”** We sing praises so that others, even in times of persecution, may know the joy in our hearts for we are Christ's. Paul wrote, ⁸**“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. It was God's plan from before Creation that Gentiles would worship him. As it is written, ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.’ Here Paul cites 2 Samuel. ¹⁰ And again it is said, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.’ This is a quote of Moses from Deuteronomy. ¹¹ And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.’ ”** Paul ends this passage by quoting King David from Psalm 117. (Romans 15:8-11) In the midst of suffering, one still needs to pray to God for the comfort, peace and endurance to be a witness of Christ's hope to the world. When life is going well we pray to God praises for the comfort he has given us to

shared with others. To “sing praise” as James states in verse 13 comes from the Greek *psallo* (psal·lo) meaning psalms. Many of the psalms and hymns taken from scriptures are praises to God and rightly sung. Paul used the same term for praise in Acts 13 saying, ³²“We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, ³³ this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you.’ ” (Acts 13:32-33) Praise and prayer are closely related – prayer should, at least in part, always be praise for God’s grace and mercy. Therefore, praise is both prayer and worship. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, “The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:5-6) Prayer is focused communication with God and encompasses speaking, listening, mediating and singing. C. S. Lewis wrote, “The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.” My beloved I do not know your routine, but this is true of mine. If I do not start my day with God, the day turns to chaos. As John Bunyan, author of Pilgrims Progress said in the 1600 hundreds, “He who runs from God in the morning will scarcely find Him the rest of the day.”

Pray With Faith

James now instructs, ¹⁴Is 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. ¹⁵And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore, 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.”

It is true the word used here translated as “sick” can refer to both physical and spiritual sickness. However, in context James is referring to spiritual sickness. In Corinthians Paul uses the same word and it is translated as “weakness.” It is clear from the passage it is referring to spiritual weakness or sickness. Paul wrote, ⁷“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But ~~he~~ *Christ* said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in **weakness**.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my **weaknesses**, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with **weaknesses**, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am **weak**, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10) Paul says he is content with living in God’s spiritual strength and because of God’s strength he can suffer with contentment. But what about when we struggle with our spiritual weakness and God’s strength? What should be done if one struggles with weariness and spiritual sickness?

James says one should call the elders. Why the elders? Because the elders are the leaders of the congregation and are those who are spiritually strong, and can offer counsel, guidance and prayer. However, this does not mean one seeking spiritual help is limited to reaching out to the elders. As Paul wrote, “**Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.**” (Galatians 6:1-2) As a community of Christ we are to be involved with each other and concerned with helping each other. We should be there for each other – confessing our sins, praying for repentance and restoration. We should be there for each other giving a hug when needed, counsel and correction when needed. We should intercede for each other in prayer to God

for spiritual strength to endure and overcome the temptations of this world. My beloved how are we doing? How are you doing?

There is no embracement in asking for prayer. When we have needs within our body we need to let others pray and even lay hands on us to pray over us and strengthen us in Christ's power. Usually there is not a need to send our brothers and sisters outside of the church for counseling. For as a body, one person's weakness is not another persons, where one is weak another is strong. Even though the church is messy and filled with broken sinners who by the grace of God live lives that seek to become ever more spiritual, we are stronger in community. Church should be a safe place, a loving place, and a place where grace and hope can be found and experienced. My beloved, how are we doing? How are you doing?

James speaks of anointing with oil, saying, [“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.”](#) Last week we spoke of the bread and wine are symbols of Christ's body and blood. Anointing with one with oil is symbolic of Christ's power and our dependence upon him. The oil is not magical, it has no power of its own. Jesus said to Simon that he showed a lack of respect my not anointing Jesus' head. A woman came to Simon's house with expensive oil or ointment and anointed Jesus' feet and Jesus said, ⁴⁶“*‘Simon You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.’ ⁴⁸ And he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’*” (Luke 7:46-48) There are a number of other examples of anointing people with oil. It might be better is we read James statement this way – *call the elders, the spiritual leaders and let them pray over the one who is seeking God's strength and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord recognizing God's power.* King David recognized the symbol of God's power and restoration in oil, writing, [“you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and](#)

mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” (Psalm 23:5-6) James, King David and the apostles understood that we live our lives through the power of the “name of the Lord.” To pray in the “name of the Lord” is to pray for the will of God to be revealed in ones life and for the strength to be obedient to live God’s will. This is why James follows verse 14 with verse 15, “And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” Just like the woman who came on her knees to anoint Jesus’ feet and by her faith he forgave her of her sins, so too, praying in faith, faith in Christ, not oneself, will strengthen those who are spiritually sick and the Lord will strengthen or raise that person up spiritually, they will be healed spiritually. A true prayer of faith will heal the spiritually sick. Then they will be able to be a witness of Christ to the world and have peace even in suffering. By the faith given and strengthen by God their sins will be forgiven by their faith and believing in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

King David was a sinner; an adulterer and murderer, and yet, he came to God with a broken heart of repentance. David wrote, “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah!*” (Psalm 32:5) David ends with “*Selah*” an exclamation of exaltation. It acknowledges God is the One to confess our sins to – not man, because only God forgives our sins through Christ to cancel eternal judgment. We are to confess our sins to one another - to seek intercessory prayer and to ask forgiveness of those we have wronged as James is teaching. My beloved, how are we doing? How are you doing?

When James writes, 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.” We have learned that using “Therefore” shows a transition in the writer’s flow of thought. James now moves from addressing those individuals who

are weak or sick spiritually and need to be strengthened to the needs of the congregation. As a community we need to confess our sins for there is spiritual strength in our numbers. Unlike David, we should not wait to confess our sins until they have been exposed. Confess quickly and seek restoration through repentance, for sin always desires secrecy in order to grow in power over you. As John Bunyon wrote, “Prayer will make a man cease from sin, or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer.” Christ’s design for his church, in part, is for us to confess our sins and pray for each other to strengthen each individual and strengthen us as a church body. Our prayers are for the healing of each other. This could be physical or spiritual healing, but physical healing will not happen without spiritual healing. As the writer of Hebrews wrote concerning our individual and community need for prayer and strengthening, ¹²“Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.” (Hebrews 12:12-17) God is always with us, but we must seek him for our fallen heart often desires the world. Seeking God in prayer both individually and in community will strengthen our hearts to living for the glory of God.

Pray With Power

James ends his thoughts about praying for those who are weak or sick spiritually by reminding us and encouraging us that our prayers are effective. James writes, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man

with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.” Elijah is an example of a man who prayed by faith. Paul wrote in his letter to the believers in Ephesus, “... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. *Paul says the sword of the Spirit is the word of God and we are to pray in the Spirit. We are to pray the scriptures and we are to pray as the Spirit directs. Prayer is about emptying ourselves of our broken selves and being filled with the Word of God and the Spirit of God.* Paul continues, “To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints ...”

(Ephesians 6:17-18) Paul is echoing what James is teaching us here. James also makes it clear that the elders are to pray intercession for the people of the flock Christ has entrusted to them – as I do for all of you. But intercessory prayer is not limited to the elders; it is the responsibility of the entire congregation. E. M. Bounds, author of 11 books on prayer wrote, “What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use--men of prayer, men mighty in prayer.” My brothers and sisters, how are we doing? How are you doing?

My beloved, if we pray with faith we can have the power of God to affect the world around us. We will be able to understand the will of God and see God’s will in action, just as Elijah did. Let us again come together and pray as a congregation of Christ. Pray for our spiritual strength, for our families and for all of us as body of Christ, pray that we may live to seek his glory. I will open our time of prayer, my brothers and sisters, then pray as the Lord leads and David will close.