

We Must Pray
James 5:13-16
ABC 9/22/19

Prayer is the obvious theme of Js 5:13-18, with it occurring in every vs. I don't claim to be an expert in the practice of prayer. It's a constant struggle for me & I don't want you to think that I've got it all figured out. But I want us all, wherever we are in our prayer life to join together in the pilgrimage of becoming a more God-dependent community of praying believers. With the mention of **suffering** in vs 13, James brings us full circle back to 1:2-3, where he opened the book with the radical command to **consider it all joy** when we **encounter various trials**. The only way we can do this is to view every difficulty through a God-ward lens & to depend on Him through prayer. We have to do this on the individual level & mentally process everything that happens to us, from the trivial to the significant, through the grid of God's sovereign love toward us in Christ. That's James' point in vs 13. But then vss 14-16a take on a strong community focus. We aren't on individual, isolated spiritual journeys, where we only cross paths with one another occasionally. No, we're pilgrims together with other saints. James is saying all of life should be lived with a God-ward, God-dependent focus, shared together with God's people. **13-20 PRAY**

This passage's main message is crystal clear: prayer. But it's one of the most difficult & most controversial passages in the book. James fires off 2 short questions in vs 13 with crisp, short answers but they cover all of life's experiences. **13**

All suffering & all blessings come from God for His glory & our own good. Therefore, in every situation we must learn to live dependent on our good & grace-giving God.

1. Anyone Suffering? The Greek word for **suffering** refers to any difficulty. James used the noun in 5:10 to describe the suffering of the prophets (cf 2 Tim 2:9; 4:5). James' readers were suffering because of their Christian testimony. But the word may refer to all types of problems we encounter in life, whether spiritual, physical, emotional, financial, or relational. As we know, becoming a Christian doesn't provide us a get out of suffering free pass. If you're going through trials of any sort, James' answer is a single word in the Greek: **Pray**. We're to tell God the truth in prayer. Tell Him about our suffering, sin, & sorrows. Confess & call upon His compassion. We all know it's easy

to sit here this morning & nod in agreement. But when you encounter difficulties, is prayer your 1st response? It's certainly not the automatic, default setting of humanity. If left to the flesh, the automatic response to suffering is to grumble, complain, throw a pity party, & question God. Instead of complaining (5:9), the sufferer should pray. Prayer is essential to enduring affliction. God is the ultimate source of comfort, leading Paul to describe Him as the **Father of mercies & God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction** (2 Cor 1:3-4). Peter wrote, **casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you** (1 Pt 5:7). James said back in vs 11, **the Lord is full of compassion & is merciful**. Do we believe that? If so, we'll pray. The present tense of the verb translated **he must pray** suggests a continual pleading with God in prayer. In other words, *let him keep on praying*. When life is difficult, when we're weak in faith, weary with illness, & crushed by affliction, we must continually plead with God for strength, comfort, & wisdom. In every situation of life, God sends problems so we'll learn to depend on Him in prayer. We often only pray after we've done everything we can do to try to fix the problem. We scheme, plan, work hard, & then remember to pray, *God, bless my efforts*. As SD Gordon famously said, *You can do more than pray after you have prayed but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed*.¹ Prayer acknowledges you're totally dependent on our sovereign & faithful God.

When you encounter suffering, what should you pray? Don't answer too quickly. We often assume we should pray for God to get us out of the situation immediately. But it's possible God has other purposes. He always works for our good & His glory (Gen 50:21; Rom 8:28). What should we pray for? We should pray for wisdom (Js 1:5), for the ability to endure with joy (1:2), for a godly attitude throughout the pain (1:3), that the works of God may be displayed in us (Jn 9:3), that God would use this for His purpose & glory (Jn 11:4), & that the fruit of the Spirit would grow in the lives of everyone involved (Gal 5:22-23). Suffering should drive us to prayer. Then James goes to the other extreme:

2. Anyone Cheerful? Is anyone cheerful? (13). Again, James shoots a one-word answer in Greek: **Sing!** The word translated **sing praises** is the word from which we get the word *Psalms*. You know

¹ *Quiet Talks on Prayer*, www.gutenberg.org/files/13196/13196-h/13196-h.htm

there's nothing wrong with being cheerful, right? Don't be a cranky Christian. As a matter of fact, what do you think is most repeated command in the Bible is?² It's not any of the prohibitions or warnings. The most repeated command in the Bible will probably surprise you: Be joyful. God tells us more than anything else, in different ways, to **praise the Lord, do not be afraid, rejoice, & give thanks**, all of which are commands to be happy, content, joyful. More than anything else, God wants you to be truly, deeply happy. Not just in heaven someday. Not when circumstances take a turn for the better. Not when the sorrow or suffering lifts. God wants you to taste real joy today. This isn't meant to trivialize the trials you may be experiencing. God says a lot about sin, sorrow, grief, pain, betrayal, failure, fear, horror, & wretchedness. But God's dominant theme is joy. God wants us to know the kind of hope that has the power to produce joy in us even in painful places. He repeatedly commands us to be really, truly, deeply happy & to praise Him. When God commands us to praise Him, what does He want? We know He's not after our empty lip service while our hearts wander somewhere else (Is 29:13). He's commanding us to look at Him, through what He's revealed to us about Himself, until we see some aspect of His glory that transcends the corrupt things clamoring for our attention right now — glory that produces an awe-filled joy we can't help but express in praise. Our delight-filled praise not only glorifies God & gives Him pleasure, but also points others to the same glory we're seeing & the same delight we're feeling. God only commands His people what will bring them ultimate happiness. That's why **His commandments are not burdensome** (1 Jn 5:3). David discovered this secret & broke out in a love song to God's commands:

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey & the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is Your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward (Ps 19:7–11).

The commands of God are more to be desired than gold because they make us happier than gold. In keeping them there's a far greater reward than gold: loving, enjoying, admiring, praising,

² The following is adapted from Jon Bloom, www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-most-repeated-command-in-the-bible

thanking, & rejoicing in God forever (Ps 16:11). That's why God has filled the Bible with repeated commands to praise Him, to not fear, to rejoice always, & to give thanks always. He wants us to be cheerful, happy, joyful. **The God of hope wants to fill us with all joy & peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope** (Rom 15:13). Today. Now. & forever.

You may think that singing praises when things are going well is easier than the command to pray when you encounter suffering, but it's not. The response of the flesh is to forget God when things go well. That's why Moses warned the Jews as they were about to enter the land:

It shall come about when the Lord your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers ... to give you, great & splendid cities which you did not build, & houses full of all good things which you did not fill, & hewn cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards & olive trees which you did not plant, & you eat & are satisfied, then watch yourself, that you do not forget the Lord who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Dt 6:10-12).

For the same reason, David talks to himself in Ps 103:2, **Bless the Lord, O my soul, & forget none of His benefits**. The natural response to good times is to forget God & all His benefits. So James says, *When things are going well, when your soul is satisfied with God's sufficiency, sing praises to Him!* James allows that sometimes you'll be down because of **suffering**. His command? **Pray!** As John Piper says, when you're down, you've got to fight for joy. One way you do that is through prayer. Praise & prayer are closely related & both are essential for our spiritual strength. Whether we're low or high, at the bottom or the top, in the pits or on the pinnacle, prayer & praise are appropriate. This was a command James personally lived out as evidenced by his own body. Eusebius testified that he *was frequently found upon his knees begging forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like those of a camel, in consequence of his constantly bending them in his worship of God, & asking forgiveness for the people.*³ Just as a laborer's hands testify to his occupation, James' callused knees testified to a life of serious prayer. So we ought to listen to what he says, not only because he was Jesus' earthly half-brother & not only because his writing is Scripture, but because he walked his talk, on his knees. The whole of life is to be lived in communion with God. The good & the bad in the Christian life is to be lived in dependence upon God. In times of trouble, in periods of rejoicing, prayer & praise acknowledge that God is sufficient.

³ Philip Schaff, *Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, vol 1, www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.vii.xxiv.html

3. Anyone Sick? 14-15

A God-ward focus doesn't mean we're to suffer or be cheerful in isolation. Vs 13 shows we must walk with God on the private, individual level. But God has also made us members of Christ's body. If we don't share our struggles & joys with others, they cannot help bear our burdens & they won't rejoice when God answers. The Christian life is a life of community. That's the easy thing to see here. Vss 14-15 are difficult to interpret as seen by the many ways it has been. The Roman Catholic church uses these vss as the basis of their sacrament of extreme unction or last rites. One source says the oil is to be anointed to *the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, & for the extremities, the reins & the feet: in women, the navel. The design thereof is, the expulsion of the relics of sin & to equip the soul for its conflicts with the powers of evil in the moment of death.*⁴ Needless to say, I'm baffled at how the idea of a priest anointing a dying person so his soul will be ready for heaven ever came out of a text about healing, not dying. I'm also baffled by those who say God *promises to heal all—every one ... all our diseases! That means not even a headache, sinus problem, not even a toothache—nothing! No sickness should come your way. God heals all your diseases... If Jesus should tarry, God's Word says that you will not die with some sickness...*⁵ This isn't a guarantee that all sickness is healed if the person has enough faith & that faithful Christians can hold off death by disease forever. So what does it mean? Some godly scholars & preachers argue that **sick** (14) should be translated *weak*, referring to spiritual weakness. They believe that James uses a word here for **anoint** that refers, not to ceremonial anointing, but to everyday anointing. Because of this they interpret **the anointing with oil** to refer to the Jewish practice of using oil as a means of bestowing honor or refreshment, especially on guests. They point out that the word **sick** in vs 15 is literally *weary*. They believe a person who's spiritually weak & weary should call for the elders who would metaphorically anoint him with oil by encouraging & refreshing him by praying with him.⁶ God will then restore the one who is weary & raise him up. They interpret this as spiritual restoration, not physical healing. I admit this interpretation is attractive in that it gets us off the

⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *Divine Healing: Is it Scriptural?* Appendix on James 5:14-16

⁵ Benny Hinn, *Rise & Be Healed*, pp 32, 25

⁶ John MacArthur, *James*, p 278

hook with the problem that it seems to guarantee physical healing. But the majority of commentators & translators understand this text to refer to physical healing, not to spiritual restoration. When the verb **weak** is used to refer to spiritual weakness, it's often made clear by some qualifier, such as, **weak in conscience** (1 Cor 8:7) or **weak in faith** (Rom 14:1, 2). Also, in the gospels, where James draws most of his vocabulary & theology, the word is always used of physical illness.⁷ While the verb **anoint** is used of common anointing, it's also used of the disciples' anointing of the sick in their healing ministry (Mk 6:13). So, while I'd agree that through prayer elders should encourage & refresh those who are spiritually weak, I'm not convinced that's what this text means. With that being said, we're left with the problem that this text seems to guarantee healing for those who follow the procedure. Before I get there, let me make several observations.

1) It's the sick person who's to call for the elders, not vice versa. It's irksome when someone tells me they wished I'd have visited them in the hospital but they never let me know they were in the hospital. I can't know unless you tell me! None of us are omniscient! Don't expect we should know when you need prayer! Let us know.

2) These vss intertwine physical illness with sin. Listen carefully: James does not assume the person is sick because of sin, but he indicates it may be a cause when he says, **if he has committed sins**. Before the sick person calls for the elders, he needs to search his own heart & humbly confess all known sins to the Lord. He should be prepared for the elders to ask, *Are you aware of any unconfessed sins in your life?*

3) Because the sick person is calling for the time of busy men, this should be reserved for serious matters, not an everyday cold. Gal 6:2 says we're to **bear one another's burdens**. The word used refers to excessive **burdens**. & Gal 6:5 says, **For each one will bear his own load**. The word **load** refers to normal burdens or responsibilities. If your illness or injury is something that affects your entire life, you should probably call for the elders.

4) James directs the elders to **pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord** (14). There are many interpretations of this. Some say **anointing** refers to the medical knowledge of the

⁷ Douglas Moo, *James*, p 237

day & applying oil to wounds, such as the Good Samaritan did with the wounded traveler (Lk 10:34). They believe the vs means to pray for them & use medical means. While I agree we should use medical means, I'm not convinced James is saying that. Others say the oil was a physical expression of concern that was used to stimulate the faith of the sick person, much as Jesus used mud to anoint the eyes of the blind man in healing him (Jn 9:6-11). Perhaps the oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who is the divine agent in healing. Anointing in the Scriptures is usually associated with setting someone apart for special service or attention. In this respect oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit who indwells & watches over each believer (cf 4:5). I believe the applying of oil to the sick is a symbolic act setting the sick apart to be ministered to in a special way by the Holy Spirit. When applied by the loving hands of the elders, it's a symbol of the presence of God's Holy Spirit. James says it's the prayer of faith that heals, not the oil. Obviously, he means it's the God to whom we pray who heals. The oil is a simple aid to faith. It's a humbling reminder that all healing must come from God. In this sense, the oil is like the bread & wine of the Lord's Supper. It builds faith & says to the sick person, *God is present & He is able to heal you*. But now we must deal with the **prayer of faith** & is this a guaranteed healing every time. **15**

This vs would be so much easier if it read, *the prayer offered in faith may make the sick person well; the Lord may raise him up*. But that's not what it says. Rather, it presents healing as the guaranteed result of **the prayer offered in faith**. It doesn't mention the possibility of failure. This raises some tension for us because we all know some who've prayed but not been healed. Some resolve this by saying the gift of miraculous healing was limited to the apostolic age & this no longer applies. While the gift of healing, I believe, was only for that period, that gift isn't in view here. Obviously, God can & does heal miraculously in any & every age when it's His will to do so. Others go to the other extreme & say it's always God's will to heal. If you aren't healed, you must not have prayed in faith. This view isn't only false, but cruel. If this were true, no faithful believer should ever get sick or die. But that doesn't square with either reality or the NT. Paul wasn't healed of his thorn in the flesh & he didn't heal Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25-30) or Trophimus (2 Tim 4:20). He urged Timothy to drink a little wine for his frequent stomach issues (1 Tim 5:23). He didn't tell

them to claim their healing by faith. There are Christians with greater faith than you & I will ever have who haven't been healed. As in all things, God is sovereign over this. Do your faith & your prayers believe this? Every prayer should be a prayer of faith, because we shouldn't ask anything of God unless we believe He's able to grant it (Js 1:6-8; Heb 11:6; Mk 11:22-24). But, & for me this the difficult thing about applying this, we don't know God's sovereign will in advance. James has just said it's presumptuous to say something is going to happen without saying, **if the Lord wills** (4:13-15). If I'd been one of John the Baptist's followers, praying for his release from prison, I wouldn't have thought it God's will for Herod to chop off his head. But it was His will. With Peter, I wouldn't have thought it God's will for Jesus to be crucified. But, thank God, it was! When Jesus was teaching you how to pray, one of the fundamental things that He said that you needed to pray was, **Thy will be done**. It's never wrong to pray, *Lord willing*. It's never inappropriate to pray, *If the Lord wills*. The **prayer offered in faith will restore** doesn't contradict or replace Jesus & James' emphasis of praying God's will be done. Whatever this passage means, it isn't a contradiction of the principle that we always pray in submission to the Lord. One of the beautiful truths about that is that God doesn't answer our prayers as we pray them, but as we would pray them if we were wiser. That's one of the mercies of being a child of God. He answers our prayers better than we pray them.

Obviously, there's a mystery here I can't fully explain. I think it helps to compare this passage with other statements about prayer in the NT where similar unqualified & absolute statements are made. Those statements are meant to encourage us about the boundless possibilities of prayer. Jesus said, **if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven** (Mt 18:19). & in Mk 11:24 He says, **I say to you, all things for which you pray & ask, believe that you have received them, & they will be granted you**. Clearly the unqualified nature of such promises is meant to encourage us to believe in the power of prayer. But just as surely it's obvious that God didn't hand over the running of the universe to us. I can't imagine how much harm we'd do to ourselves & others if God were obligated to answer every prayer we prayed. We're never taught in the Bible that we have a right to expect that God will give

us whatever we ask of Him. Only as we pray in His will, in His name, are they answered as we ask them. That He has promised to hear & answer our prayers is a clear teaching of God's Word. But so is the fact that His ways are far above our ways. God is God & we are not. The prayer of faith comes from a faith in the almighty God who sovereignly carries out His will. Nothing is beyond Him. He can heal anyone anytime He wills. He does as He wills in every circumstance, working all things for His glory & for our good.

All this to say my understanding of this vs is this: If you're seriously ill or have an injury that is debilitating, call the elders for prayer. We'll come & talk to you about your situation. We may ask if you're aware of any sins you need to confess. We'll anoint you with oil as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, who is mighty to heal. We'll pray with you, believing God can & does heal. But, we must submit to His sovereign will, which we seldom can know in advance. If He chooses to heal you, give Him the glory, because it wasn't the oil, it wasn't our prayers or faith that healed you. It was God! This isn't some kind of magical formula for healing. God is sovereign in the healing. He chooses when & whom He will heal. Are we convinced of His power enough to pray with confidence & yet trust Him to do things as He pleases? That's what He's calling us to do here.

Sometimes it's helpful to imagine the situation described in the Word of God. Suppose you still wanted & hoped for the thing you prayed for but hadn't received. & suppose that one night Jesus Himself came & sat at your bedside & said, *You've asked for this, but the Father cannot give it to you. I cannot tell you why, but I can assure you it's better for you & for your loved ones that you be refused this than that you should receive what you've asked for.* Would you complain? Would you doubt He was telling the truth? Would you demand a further explanation? Of course not. You'd say, **How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand. When I awake, I am still with You (Ps 139:17-18).** & you'd also say, **Shall we indeed accept good from God & not accept adversity? (Job 2:10).** & **though He slay me, I will hope in Him (Job 13:15).** Wonderful expressions of faith & love that would never have been uttered if the Lord always gave us whatever we asked for. Our entire faith rests in the

character of God as invariably, unchangeably wise, loving, & good toward us. So our life of prayer must rest on that same confidence. James has 2 concluding thoughts in **16a**.

4. Confess to & Pray for One Another Therefore shows this is a conclusion. The idea is since the prayer for healing offered in faith accomplishes so much (15a) & since God is anxious to forgive the sins of His people (15b), the whole community should be encouraged to confess their sins to one another & pray for one another. By so doing, the health of the church will be maintained.⁸ In other words, maintaining open, sharing, & praying relationships with other Christians will help keep believers from bottoming out in their spiritual lives. These relationships help give the spiritual strength that provides victory over sin.⁹ Of course, confession, like prayer for healing, has also been taken to extremes. Some never do it at all while others confess things in public they shouldn't. I read this week about a man in a SS class who shared in front of the entire class, with his wife present, that he'd lusted over another woman in the class. That's not what James is encouraging here, although some interpret it like that. Generally, according to Scripture, the confession should be as public as the sin. If it's a private sin, confess it privately, or find a godly, trustworthy saint who will keep your confidence & confess it to him & ask to be held accountable. If your sin hurt specific individuals, confess it to those people & ask their forgiveness. If it affected the entire church, then ask the elders for an appropriate time & place to confess it to the church. James is acknowledging we're all struggling against sin & we need one another in the battle. We need to help one another as we fight to establish & maintain a God-centered focus.

There's plenty of application here for all of us. I'm sure none of us would say our prayer life is all it should be. So God is asking us all to work at prayer & praise in all things. Here are 7 conclusions that summarize my current understanding of how Js 5:13-16 should be applied in the local church.

1. Since God is in control of everything, we cannot know in advance what the outcome of our prayers will be. Therefore, we should pray with humility, not making promises we can't keep. At the end of the day, God is God & we are not. We must keep this perspective before us while we pray for the sick.

⁸ Moo, p 245

⁹ MacArthur, p 279

2. Since God is all-powerful, we should expect that God will answer our prayers, often in ways we cannot humanly explain. Therefore, we should pray boldly & ask God for the healing we seek if it's His will.

3. Since everything God creates is good, we should view both prayer & medicine as gifts to help us when we're sick.

4. Since God knows what's best, we must believe that when healing does not come, it's for our good & His glory. This is nothing more than a summary of what Rom 8:28 teaches. Sometime we will see this very clearly & others times we must choose to believe it by faith. But it's still true in every case whether we fully understand it or not.

5. Since faith is a gift from God, we understand that God will give the faith to believe when He wants to move in unusual power. Our job is always to pray regardless of our own feelings one way or the other. We're not responsible for the answers, only for the praying. If someone is healed, it isn't our faith that did the healing. Faith is only an instrument for God's power & even that faith is a gift from God.

6. Since sin may block God's healing power, we are fully justified to inquire as to a person's spiritual state before we pray for them.

7. Since God's Word is true, we glorify Him when we obey His Word, regardless of the outcome. God doesn't call us to understand every detail in advance. We're to obey what we know & leave the results with Him.

Why are some prayers for healing answered & some not? There is no one answer that can fully explain God's purposes, but I am content with the words of Ps 115:3, **Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him.** Through prayer we have the privilege of lifting the burden from our brothers & sisters. Through prayer we may become agents of healing to those who are sick. What an honor to be used of God in this way. Therefore, let us pray boldly, confidently, humbly, in faith believing that as we pray for the sick God hears, cares, & will do what's best in every situation. When we pray for the sick, we're obeying what God tells us to do. Isn't that what we each want?