

Prayer

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[0 : 00] Well, the story is told of a very small American town that had never had a bar in it before. And so a local businessman decided that he would open a bar in the town.

And the Christians from the local church were concerned about this new business proposal. And so they decided they would try and do something about it. So they called an all-night prayer meeting and they prayed that God would intervene and stop this bar selling alcohol.

And it just so happened that after the bar had been built, shortly after, there was a thunderstorm and the bar was struck by lightning and it was completely destroyed.

And so the owner of the bar decided that he would sue the church. He claimed that the prayers of the church were responsible for this damage. And so the church hired a lawyer to argue in court that they weren't responsible at all for what had happened.

And so after the initial review of the case, the judge had said, well, no matter how this case turns out, one thing is clear. The bar owner believes in the power of prayer, but the Christians don't believe in prayer.

[1 : 13] Now, as we come to the end of the letter of James, it is clear that James ends with a strong emphasis on prayer. Because he tells us prayer is powerful and effective.

And yet these verses are actually some of the most difficult verses to interpret and understand in the letter of James. At least they are since the last time I told you these verses are the most difficult to interpret and to understand.

And the reason is, is because although the theme is prayer, James speaks about anointing with oil. He speaks about the prayer of faith. He speaks about healing. He speaks about the confession of sins.

And he speaks about the prayer of a righteous person. And so whilst prayer is definitely the emphasis, trying to get our heads around what James is exactly saying is a bit more complicated and complex.

And so the aim for us this afternoon is not simply to go away with a greater encouragement to pray. Although, in looking at prayer in the Bible, we should go away with a greater encouragement to pray.

[2 : 18] What James' letter is saying here is that we need to go away as we end his letter and as we look at these verses, not just with prayer being the thing we know we need to do, but knowing that we need to be greater in our commitment to God and we need to be committed to God's people.

And that is really, despite the talk of prayer, what James is saying here. He wants his readers, including us, to be committed to God and committed to one another as God's people.

And so we're going to look at this passage under three headings this afternoon. The first is prayer is a priority, verse 13. The second, prayer is powerful, verse 14 to 18. And then thirdly, prayer is purposeful, verse 19 to 20.

So first of all, prayer is a priority. So whatever the occasion in life, James is saying prayer is a priority. Let's read 13 and 14 again. Is anyone among you in trouble?

Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you ill? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them.

[3 : 28] So what James is saying here, in every circumstance in life, pray. If you're in trouble, you should pray. If you're suffering, you should pray. When things are difficult, I wonder what our first instinct is.

Is it to talk to somebody about how difficult things are? Or is it to pray to God? It ought to be to pray to God. That's what James is saying. So that's one end of the spectrum, trouble, suffering.

But what about the other end of the spectrum? Because James says, is anyone happy? Or is anyone cheerful? Then he says, sing songs of praise to God.

That's also a thing to pray. And to praise God with our lips. And it's really a reminder that we shouldn't just turn to God when things are difficult. We should also turn to God, not just in the suffering times or the sad times, but when things are good and when we're happy.

Otherwise, prayer becomes a bit like the fourth emergency service. We treat God as if we give him a 999 prayer and then he comes to our rescue and he helps us.

[4 : 33] But James wants prayer to be instinctive in our lives. Because we've got so much to praise God for. Whatever our circumstances, we should be bringing those to God in prayer.

And of course, it's easy to know this in theory, isn't it? And yet what James wants is not just us to know things in our heads or to believe them, but he wants us to practice them in our lives.

That's why we've called our series in James, Faith That Works. Because James is saying our faith ought to be practical. What we believe should impact how we live our daily lives.

James wants us to have a faith that works. So prayer is a priority in every circumstance. Now, that's basically our first point. Prayer is a priority. It's the first and shortest point I've ever given.

So second point, because this is more complicated. And here's where there's far more for us to think about. And that is prayer is powerful. So let's just read again verse 14 to 16.

[5 : 34] Is anyone among you ill? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.

The Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Okay, so it's difficult trying to understand what James is actually saying here. Because these verses raise all kinds of questions.

So is James addressing a specific situation? Or is he talking about general teaching here? Is he talking about physical sickness? Or is he talking about spiritual sickness?

Or is he talking about both physical and spiritual? And another question may be, well, how sick do you need to be before you call on the elders to come and pray for you?

[6 : 34] What's the significance of the anointing with oil that he speaks about? And what is the prayer of faith? These are the kinds of questions that these verses throw up for us. And so it's worth highlighting what James isn't saying here before we think about what he is saying.

Because these verses have been used to suggest that God will always heal the sick when people pray with faith. And yet we know that when people pray for those who are sick, it isn't the case, that people are always healed.

And so the question is, well, is it because there wasn't enough faith exercised by the person who was praying or by the person who was seeking healing?

Was it just they didn't have enough faith and that's why they weren't healed? Well, can you see how pastorally dangerous it is to use these verses in that way?

To misunderstand what James is saying here is a dangerous thing. And that's why we've got to interpret what he says in these verses within the context of his letter as a whole.

[7 : 40] So the first thing to look at is the words that he uses here and to understand what they mean. Because in verse 14, the original Greek word for sick or for ill can also mean weak or to be weak.

And so the commentators bring this out because this is how this word is often used elsewhere in the New Testament. And so the translation could be in verse 14, is anyone among you weak? Not just sick or ill, but weak. Which means James could be talking in a spiritual sense and not just in a physical sense. Or it could be both. And so there are different interpretations.

But I think the language in this section seems to give a sense of both the physical and the spiritual weakness or sickness. Because we notice in verse 15 and 16, James mixes the language between sickness and sin.

He mixes them up. So verse 15 begins with these words, And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. So it sounds physical. But then verse 15 ends in a spiritual way.

[8 : 50] Because James says, If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Which obviously is spiritual. And then verse 16 does the same thing. But this time James switches it around.

So verse 16 begins, Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other. Which sounds spiritual, doesn't it? But then verse 16 ends by James saying, So that you may be healed. Which sounds physical. And so we need to keep this in mind as we try and understand what James is saying here. So I take and I understand James to be saying that this is about prayer for both physical and spiritual weakness.

Physical and spiritual sickness. It's about both sickness and sin. Where both healing and forgiveness is needed.

And hopefully this will become clear as we navigate our way through. And especially as we consider the example of Elijah that James gives near the end of this passage. And so let's just ask a few questions and consider the different phrases that James uses here in verse 14 to 16 to see why this interpretation seems to make sense.

[10:07] So the first question there is about the elders. Well, why call upon the elders of the church? I think this indicates to us that James is talking about something really serious here.

Because anybody can pray for you when you are sick or ill or in any kind of need. Anybody can pray. Not just the elders. But it seems to be fairly significant that the elders have to be called upon. And I'm not saying there's anything necessarily wrong with this practice of calling upon the elders to pray for people. In fact, I can think of two occasions when I've done this. When in a previous church, two people wanted the elders to come and pray for them and anoint them with oil because they were sick.

And so we did. We went as elders and we prayed. And with different results. One person would say they were healed. The other person sadly wasn't. And later died. But of course, it's not just prayer for healing here.

Because elders should always be praying for people. Whether they're physically sick or physically well. Or if they're spiritually sick or spiritually well, the role of an elder is to pray for those under their care.

[11:18] And so we should all be concerned. Both about their physical well-being and also our spiritual well-being. So that's one question. Another question is, is there a significance in anointing with oil?

In the Bible, anointing with oil is often a symbol of consecration or of setting apart or of making holy. And I think that is significant. Also, oil is often used for medicinal purposes.

Like the Good Samaritan used oil on the person who was injured. Jesus' disciples also anointed sick people with oil and healed them. And so I don't think there's necessarily anything special about the use of oil here.

But James says this is to be done in the name of the Lord. And so the emphasis here is on the Lord. Not on the elders. Not on the oil.

Not even on the prayer. But on the Lord. The Lord is the one who hears and answers prayer. And then thirdly, what about the prayer offered in faith?

[12:23] Or the prayer of faith? It's called in some translations. Well, first of all, it is a prayer. It's a prayer. It isn't a command. Like you might see if you've ever watched God TV.

And when we lived in Edinburgh, we had this package that had like hundreds of TV channels. And one of the free channels was God TV. And so on occasion, when I was completely bored stiff, I would often flick on God TV and just see what was happening.

And quite often, there would be a preacher and he would be commanding things like, Sickness, come out. Or blind eye, see. Or sore leg, get better, walk.

And it was a command as opposed to being a prayer. But here, this is not a command. This is a prayer to God that James is talking about.

So the prayer of faith is a prayer. And of course, it requires faith. Not faith in the person praying. Not faith in the person who is wanting the prayer.

[13:26] But faith in the God who answers prayer. God is the one with the power. God is the one who answers according to his will. So just remember what James had said in chapter 4.

Verse 15. He says there, Instead, you ought to say, If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that. So we can't assume that any kind of answer to prayer will come unless it's the Lord's will.

The Lord will work his will out in sync with our prayers. In some mysterious way, God's will is accomplished through the prayers of his people.

But this is not some kind of prayer that has an inherent healing power about it. God is the one who heals when he chooses. And so the great power of prayer is that God answers our prayers better than we ever pray them.

He knows what we need better than we do. And he answers according to his will. And I think the Apostle Paul is a good example of this. Remember, he spoke about having a thorn in his flesh. [14:36] And three times he pleaded with the Lord to take away this thorn in his flesh. But it didn't happen. It wasn't the Lord's will. So there's a fourth question, and that is the prayer of a righteous person.

There in verse 16. I wonder, you may think, James might be suggesting here that if you aren't righteous enough, then there's no chance that your prayer will be answered. But he isn't saying that. Because when he speaks of a righteous person, James is simply referring to someone who is in a right relationship with God. Someone who is declared righteous by God through their faith in Jesus.

And that's why the prayers of God's people are powerful and effective. Okay, so there are some questions to help us navigate our way through these complex verses.

But let's get back to the reason for the prayer. And I suggest this is prayer not just for physical healing, but prayer for spiritual forgiveness and restoration.

[15:44] Because James is clearly making a connection between the sickness and the sin here. So he may even be referring to a situation where the sickness of those he's talking about is a consequence of their sin.

Where God has already begun judgment on sinful behavior. And some in the church are suffering physically as a result.

And of course, we need to be really careful when we say this. Because we're not suggesting that every sickness, each and every sickness, should be traced back to a particular sin in somebody's life.

We're not saying that. Remember what Jesus said about the blind man in John chapter 9. He said his blindness wasn't because of his sin. So there's not a direct line from sin to sickness.

And yet, it is sometimes true that illness or sickness is caused by a particular sin. And it can be part of God's discipline on his people.

[16:52] Like when Paul spoke to the Corinthians about their abuse of the Lord's Supper. Just listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians chapter 11. He says, See what Paul is saying there.

He's saying that the Corinthians are suffering physically because of their sin. And so I reckon James is talking about something similar here. He's linking spiritual health to physical health. Because the sickness in some of his readers is related to their sinful behavior. And that's why they does need to be dealt with. And so whether we are weak or healthy, we always need to be ready to confess our sins.

And of course, our sin is personal. So we need to confess our sins to God. But for the sake of accountability in the church, we also need to confess our sins to one another. That's why we had a prayer of confession near the beginning of our service today.

And so while this may be related to a particular situation that James is addressing in his letter, it is our responsibility as members of Christ's church, of Christ's body, to confess our sins to God and to one another so that we are healthy Christians and not sick Christians.

[18:29] So that we are a healthy church and not a sick church. And this is where the example of Elijah comes in, in verse 17 and 18.

Because James uses Elijah as an example of the power of prayer to combat this kind of spiritual sickness. So let's read those verses again, 17 and 18.

Elijah was a human being, even as we are. 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.

So James encourages us to pray by pointing to Elijah. Now, Elijah is one of the Old Testament prophets, a great prophet, a great hero of God. But James says Elijah was also a man just like us. Elijah had the same nature as we do. He's a human being as we are human beings. And yet, James points to Elijah as someone whose prayer was powerful and effective.

[19:33] And what James is referring to here is part of the story of Elijah back in 1 Kings 17 and 18. So you can go and read that later. Two big chunks, two big chapters in 1 Kings.

And in those chapters, what happens is that Elijah prayed that it wouldn't rain. And it didn't rain. And then three and a half years later, Elijah prayed that it would rain again.

And it did rain again. But what's fascinating is that when you read those chapters, 1 Kings 17 and 18, there's a far more obvious example that illustrates the power of prayer to heal than what James says here about the rain.

Because in those chapters, there's a story about a woman. She's called the widow of Zarephath. And Elijah raises back to life the widow's son. So her son became ill and died.

And so Elijah prayed to God to raise up the dead body. And so God answered Elijah's prayer. And the boy came back to life again. And it's an astonishing example of prayer that's offered in faith to make a sick person well and to raise them up.

[20 : 53] Allah, the thing that James is talking about in James 5, verse 15. And so the question is, well, why does James refer to the rain here about Elijah in this chapter instead of referring to the story with the more obvious prayer for healing of sickness, raising somebody to life again?

Why does he do that? Well, I'm indebted to Andy Gemmel from the Cornhill Training Course for pointing this out to me. Because Elijah's prayer about the rain comes in the context of the spiritual adultery of the people of Israel.

So the people of Israel needed to decide whether they would be committed to God or not. And so the removal of rain was a sign of God's judgment on the people of Israel for their sin.

They would suffer as a result of the drought that would inflict their land. And so the drought, the lack of rain, the suffering, it was meant to wake God's people up, to wake up the people of Israel to the perilous position they were in because of their spiritual adultery so that they could be restored to God again.

And that's why Elijah challenged the people by saying, and this is what he says in his prayer in 1 Kings 18, he says, How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him.

[22 : 17] But if Baal is God, follow him. And so what happens in the story is two sacrifices are set up, and the prophets of Baal call out to Baal to send fire to burn up their sacrifice, but nothing happens.

And then Elijah calls on God, and God sends fire and burns up that sacrifice, proving that he is God.

And so Elijah prayed to God and said, again from 1 Kings 18, Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.

And so God heard Elijah's prayer because the people were restored to God again. And then afterwards the rain began to fall. And so Elijah is this example of the power of prayer to stop people being double-minded and to turn back to God.

And that really is the issue that James is tackling in his whole letter. He wants his readers to stop their double-mindedness and to be wholehearted in their commitment to God, to choose who they will serve to stop their spiritual adultery.

So they had sinned, they were sick, they were weak, they needed to confess their sins so they could be forgiven, so they could be healed and restored to God.

[23 : 42] And so can you see how James is not simply talking about prayer for physical healing, which is what we might think when we just read the passage simply, but there's a lot more to it.

James is addressing a bigger and a deeper and a more serious problem than physical sickness. He is addressing the spiritual sickness of his readers and therefore ours too.

These people needed to be restored in their relationship with God. And so that tells us that we all need restoration in our relationship with God when we sin.

And so that's why prayer is powerful in doing this. But then finally, thirdly, prayer is a priority, prayer is powerful, and prayer is purposeful.

So the purpose of Elijah's prayer for the people of Israel was for them to be restored to God. And that's exactly what James wants for his readers. And that helps us to make sense of his closing verses in verse 19 and 20, when he says, So James is concerned about people, the people he's writing to, wondering from the truth.

[25 : 06] Or some people may have already wondered from the truth. And that word, wonder, has the sense of being led astray or deceived.

Because when people wonder from the truth, then they stray into sinful patterns of behavior and go further away from God, which means when we sin, we put ourselves in a perilous position.

A bit like a mountain climber who wanders off the path that they're supposed to be on. And that happens a lot in Scotland. There's so many mountains, so many dangerous Monroes to climb, that it is common to see on the news a rescue team being called out because somebody has climbed a mountain on their own, and they've wandered off the path, and they're lost, and they need to be rescued.

And it's great news when the search and rescue team are successful. They find the person, and they bring them safely back down again. And yet it's tragic when they can't get the person and bring them back again.

So James is saying here, Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death. So he's saying here, if this happens in the church, if somebody wanders off into sin, then don't leave them to wander off.

[26 : 29] It's vital that those who have wandered into sin are rescued and restored, which, of course, is the job, not just of the church elders, but the job of everybody within the church.

Every member has got to be looking out for each other, caring for one another, and loving one another. Because if we're part of the family of God, then we're brothers and sisters in Christ. And so just like, say, you were climbing Ben Nevis with your family, and a family member wandered off the path when you were climbing, what would you do?

Well, you'd go and get them. You wouldn't just leave them up there. So if we climbed Ben Nevis, and all five of us as a family went up, and we came back down, and then Joshua was missing, and somebody said, Oh, yeah, I thought Joshua went up and climbed the mountain with you, but there's only four of you.

We're hardly going to say, Oh, yeah, he just kind of wandered off the path. Then it was misty, and we lost him, but we thought, Oh, well, we'll just come down and leave him. That's never going to happen in a family, is it?

[27 : 31] And so can you see what James is saying here? We have got to go after others if they wander and stray, and we ought to expect that others will come after us, if that's us in that position.

James is saying action needs to be taken. And, of course, the action is going to involve physically going to the person and reaching out to them to try and bring them back.

But given the context of what James is saying here about prayer, the action is also going to be praying for the wanderer to be restored, praying for the wanderer to come back.

And the fantastic news that James leaves us with is anyone who has wandered into sin can be restored. and can be brought back.

The great news is that our sins can be forgiven. And that's what James means by saying cover over a multitude of sins. He's saying that God won't cancel the person because they have sinned against him.

[28 : 35] Just like our culture will cancel you. If you sin or fail or go against the status quo, you will be rejected forever. Nobody will sponsor you anymore.

Nobody will be interested in you anymore. Your Twitter account will go for good. But with God, he restores because he forgives. That's what James is saying here.

God is willing to forgive, even willing to forgive a multitude of sins, no matter how great or big or many they are. And so James concludes by reminding us that God forgives.

God wants to restore sinful people to himself so they can be saved. And that really is the heart of the Christian message, isn't it? Christianity is about the God who loves us so much that he sent his son Jesus Christ into this world to seek and to save lost people.

Lost people like you and me. And so we are so sick and we are so sinful that Jesus needed to die for us. And yet we're so loved that Jesus was glad to die for us so that we could be restored to God.

[29 : 51] And so it's only when we grasp the seriousness of our sin and our need to be forgiven will we then have a desire to see others forgiven of their sin and restored to God again.

And whether they be believers who have wandered and who need to be brought back or whether they are unbelievers who are lost and need to be brought in.

We need to point those who are lost to Jesus and point back to Jesus those who have wandered from him. And this means pleading with people praying for people to turn from sin and towards God. And so we should never underestimate the power of prayer to do this because what matters more than any physical sickness or illness as significant as that kind of suffering is what matters more is our spiritual sickness before God.

It is a greater problem and we need to be forgiven. And so whether our prayers are for a church member who has strayed and wandered off into sin or whether our prayers are for a family member who has strayed and wandered off into sin we should keep praying for God to restore them because God will forgive.

[31 : 19] He will cover a multitude of sins. John Newton, the great hymn writer, said this. He said of prayer, Thou art coming to a king large petitions with thee bring for his grace and power are such none can ever ask too much.

And so we need forgiveness from sin more than anything else in the world. More than we need healing from sickness. And that's why James' concern here is for the spiritual welfare of his readers. And that should be our chief concern too when it comes to other people and when it comes to our prayers for other people and also for ourselves. Sin always needs to be dealt with in our lives, in our church, in Christ's church.

And so that's why it's vital that we recognize the priority and the power and the purpose of prayer for the sake of our relationship with God and for the sake of others and their relationships with God too.